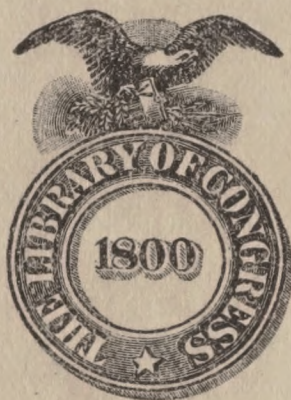


FOUR GIRLS *of* FORTY YEARS AGO



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"I THINK YOU ARE THE MOST WONDERFUL PERSON I EVER HEARD OF," DECLARED DULCIE.—*Page 87.*

Four Girls of Forty Years Ago

BY
NINA RHOADES

ILLUSTRATED BY
ELEANOR R. WEEDEN



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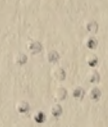
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Four Girls of Forty Years Ago



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE FOUR LITTLE WINSLOWS	9
II. A VISITOR	25
III. A WONDERFUL DAY	39
IV. THE SINGING LADY	54
V. MISS POLLY'S STORY	71
VI. PAUL	91
VII. THE STOLEN CHILD	104
VIII. THE HOUSE ON AVENUE A	119
IX. MISS POLLY'S PIANO	133
X. DULCIE'S BIRTHDAY	147
XI. PAUL ENTERTAINS MISS POLLY	164
XII. DAISY WRITES A LETTER	178
XIII. DECORATION DAY	193
XIV. MRS. WINSLOW GETS A TELEGRAM	214
XV. DULCIE TAKES THE HELM	228
XVI. LOOKING FOR A SITUATION	241
XVII. STEPMOTHERS	258
XVIII. A HOME-COMING	270

ILLUSTRATIONS

“I think you are the most wonderful person I ever heard of” declared Dulcie (Page 87)	<i>Frontispiece</i> ✓
	FACING PAGE
The door swung open so quietly and easily that she nearly fell over backward	62 ✓
“She’s got the big fellow down. She’s sittin’ on his head”	128 ✓
Daisy took the two letters, flew down-stairs, and out into the street	190 ✓
“We’re—we’re looking for a situation”	258 ✓
“Do we say ‘How do you do, stepmother?’” Maud wanted to know	274 ✓

Four Girls of Forty Years Ago

CHAPTER I

THE FOUR LITTLE WINSLOWS

THEY all lived in the big front room on the top floor of Grandpa Winslow's old-fashioned house near Washington Square. They had lived there for so long that Molly and Maud—who were only nine and seven—could not remember ever having lived anywhere else. But Dulcie—who was nearly twelve—and Daisy—who was ten and a half—had dim memories of a very different home—a home that was always bright and happy, and in which the grim figures of Grandma Winslow and her daughter, Aunt Kate, played no part.

It was more than five years since their father had brought his four little motherless girls from the Western town where they were born, to the stately, gloomy old house near Washington Square. It had seemed to Mr. Winslow the wisest thing to do, for he was young and inexperienced, and the death of his pretty young wife had almost broken his heart. With the exception of his father, who was very old

and infirm, and his stepmother, whom he had never loved very much, he had no near relatives, and so when his father had written in his trembling old hand, offering a home to him and his four little girls, he had accepted the offer, and they had left the Western home, where they had been so happy, and taken the long journey to New York, accompanied by Lizzie, the faithful servant, who had formerly been maid-of-all-work, but now acted as the children's nurse.

That was five years ago, and many things had happened since then. In the first place, their father had been in China for more than a year. Young Jim Winslow, as every one called him, had not found it easy to make a living in New York, and he had ended by accepting the offer of a friend in China, who promised him a good position in his business. And one sad day, he had kissed his little girls good-bye and gone away. How they had all cried, for though Papa tried to be very cheerful, they felt quite sure that this going away was different from any other.

"When Papa went to The Centennial in Philadelphia, he only stayed away a week," Daisy had reminded them, with a great effort to be cheerful, "and he brought us all home something. I suppose China is a great deal farther away than Philadelphia."

"Of course it is," said Dulcie, with difficulty sup-

pressing a sob; "it's away the other side of the world. But he says we must all be good till he comes back, so we'll have to try very hard."

"We've got Lizzie, anyhow," chimed in Molly. "She won't ever go away; she promised Papa she wouldn't leave us till he came back."

That was a comforting thought, and as Lizzie had come into the nursery at that moment, they had all run to her, and she soon had Molly and Maud in her lap, while Dulcie and Daisy sat on the arms of her chair, for next to their father, they all loved Lizzie better than any one in the world.

But alas! When Lizzie had promised not to leave the children, she had not counted on her temper. She loved the little girls dearly, but she had never learned to control her quick temper, and in less than a month from the day of Mr. Winslow's departure, she had been dismissed by Grandma for having used what that lady called "outrageously impertinent language." That was a dreadful day for the children, even more dreadful than the one on which their father left for China. Their father had occasionally left them for a short time before, but never, never since their mother's death, had Lizzie been absent for a single night.

"Who'll put us to bed?" wailed Maud, "and give us our baths, and hear us say our prayers? Oh! oh! I want to go away with Lizzie. I don't want to stay here any more—I don't, I don't!"

"Hush, Maudie, don't cry so," soothed Dulcie, who was crying herself. "I'll hear your prayers. I'm 'most twelve, so I guess it will be all right, and Daisy and I can take our own baths, so I guess we can teach you and Molly to do it, too. But, oh, Lizzie, Lizzie, I do want you so much!" And poor Dulcie broke down utterly, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

The next important event was Grandpa's death. This, though sad, was not the heart-break to the children that Lizzie's departure had been. Grandpa was very feeble, and for several years had taken small notice of them, except to nod and smile kindly at them, when they came into his room, and ask them their names, which he never seemed able to remember from one day to another. Lizzie had once told them that Grandpa was losing his mind, and that they must always be very kind and polite to him, and they had looked upon the old gentleman with a kind of awe, which had been greatly increased when, one morning, Mary, the chambermaid, had come into the nursery to tell them in a whisper that "their dear grandpa" had died suddenly during the night.

But all these things had happened nearly a year before the rainy January afternoon on which this story begins. It had been a very stormy day, and as Miss Hammond, the prim daily governess, who came for three hours every morning, was laid up

with a bad cold, there had not even been lessons to break the monotony, and time had hung rather heavily on the children's hands. Even the usual diversion of luncheon with their elders had been denied them, for Aunt Kate had given a luncheon party, and, according to the Winslow code, little girls were expected to keep out of the way on all such occasions. So Mary had brought them each a bowl of bread and milk, that being less trouble than anything else, and although bread and milk is nourishing, it is not what Dulcie called "exciting," and by four o'clock they were all feeling decidedly bored, and more than a little hungry.

Dulcie had read till her eyes ached; Daisy had completed a whole spring outfit for Maud's doll, and Molly and Maud had played so many games of lotto that Molly declared crossly she was sure she could play lotto in her sleep.

"If only it didn't pour so, I'd go round to the library for another book," remarked Dulcie, with a yawn.

Dulcie cared more about reading than about almost anything else in the world. She read everything she could lay her hands on, and when her father went away to China, he had given her a ticket to the circulating library, which was only three blocks away.

"I wish things happened to real people the way they do to people in books," said Molly. "If we

were in a book, something interesting would be sure to happen to us this afternoon. We've been in the house all day, and only had bread and milk for lunch."

"Something rather interesting is going to happen now," said Daisy, who had been looking out of the window for the past five minutes. "The Van Arsdales across the street are going to have a party. There's an awning, and the ice-cream wagon has just stopped there. We can watch the carriages come, and if they happen to leave one of the parlor shades up, the way they did that other time, we can see them dance."

Mollie and Maud looked interested, but Dulcie sighed.

"I don't see much fun in watching a party you can't go to yourself," she said, discontentedly. "If Grandma would only let us know some of the neighbors, we might be invited to places sometimes. I wonder how it would feel to have a party."

"I don't think I should like it much," said Daisy. "Things might go wrong, and that would be so embarrassing. You remember the time those Leroy children came to see us, and Grandma called out we were making too much noise. I think I'd rather go to other people's parties, especially while we have to live with Grandma and Aunt Kate."

Dulcie sighed again.

"If only Papa would come home," she said.

"Things weren't half so bad when he was here."

"He is coming home next year," put in Daisy, cheerfully. Daisy always looked on the bright side of things. "You know what he said in his last letter, about our all having a nice little home together. Perhaps Lizzie will come back then, too. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Mary told the butcher-man that Lizzie is going to be married," announced Maud. "I heard her yesterday when I was in the kitchen, playing with the kitty."

"I don't believe it," declared Molly, indignantly. "Lizzie never told Mary things; she said she was an old gossip."

"Well, Mary said it, anyhow," persisted Maud. "She told the butcher-man, and he said ——"

"Oh, children, don't argue," interrupted peace-loving Daisy. "Come here and watch for the party. I guess the carriages will begin to come pretty soon."

"They had ice-cream for lunch down-stairs," exclaimed Molly, with a sudden recollection. "I wonder if there's any left!"

"If there were we wouldn't get any," said Dulcie. "Mary and Bridget would be sure to eat it all up."

"If Grandma were like a grandmother in a book, she'd see that we had ice-cream, and lots of other nice things," remarked Molly, reflectively. "Book

grandmothers are always so nice. I wonder why real ones aren't?"

"I guess real ones are, too," said Daisy. "That's just the trouble with us. Grandma isn't our real grandmother; she's only a step, and steps are never any good. Even Aunt Kate isn't our real aunt, because Grandpa was only her stepfather."

"Steps are pretty bad," remarked Dulcie, "but the worst of all is a stepmother, and, thank goodness, we haven't got that. If I thought we were ever going to have a stepmother, I'd—I'd do something awful."

"What would you do?" inquired Molly, eagerly.

"I don't know, I haven't made up my mind yet, but I've often thought about it. I'm sure it won't happen, though; Papa is much too kind to do anything so dreadful, but if it did, well—don't let's talk about it." Dulcie's dark little face had grown suddenly very stern and determined, and her sisters regarded her with something like awe. Although only a little more than a year older than Daisy, Dulcie had always been looked up to by the younger children as a superior being. In the first place, she was the only one of them who could remember Mamma, and then she was so very clever. Dulcie always knew her lessons, and moreover, she really liked to study. Even Miss Hammond, strictest of teachers, never had any complaints to make against Dulcie; and Daisy had once overheard Aunt Kate

telling a visitor that "the eldest child was really remarkably bright, and took after her dear grandfather." Now, the children all knew that Grandpa Winslow had been a great man in his day, and to hear that one of them was supposed to resemble him was a most wonderful compliment, especially from Aunt Kate, who seldom said pleasant things about any one. So perhaps Dulcie may be pardoned for being a trifle conceited, and conscious of her own importance.

"Here comes the first carriage," announced Daisy, from her post at the window.

All the others hurried to get a glimpse of the first arrivals at the party. The carriage door was opened by a man in livery, and several figures were hustled up the Van Arsdales' front steps, under the awning. Another and another carriage followed, and the next ten minutes were—according to Daisy—"really quite exciting." But watching the arrival of guests at a party to which one has not been invited, is not, after all, a very thrilling amusement, and by the time the sixth carriage had deposited its freight, and rolled away, even Daisy's enthusiasm had begun to cool.

"How hard it rains," said Molly, flattening her nose against the window-pane. "I wonder if the stolen child is out in all this storm."

"Of course she is," said Dulcie in a tone of conviction. "She's been out all day with her basket,

and she's wet through and so cold and hungry. But her basket isn't full yet, and she doesn't dare go home, for fear that dreadful woman will beat her."

Dulcie gave a little shiver, and glanced from the window back to the warm, comfortable room.

"It's terribly sad," said Daisy, with a sigh. "I do wish we could help her find her family. If we could only get acquainted with her, we might be able to find out how she was stolen. They always remember something, you know, even if it's happened when they were very little."

"Let's make up some more about her," said Molly. "Come and sit close to the register, it's so nice and warm. It's nicer to talk about things like that when you're very comfortable."

"All right," agreed Dulcie, and they all four gathered round the register, where the hot air from the furnace puffed in their faces.

"You begin, Dulcie," commanded Daisy. "You make up so much better than we do. Tell what's going to happen when she gets home to-night."

"Well," began Dulcie, her eyes growing big and dreamy, as they always did when she "made up things." "It will be quite dark before she dares to go home, and she will be so tired that she can hardly drag herself up the long flight of stairs, to that dirty garret. There won't be any fire because the wicked old woman will be drunk again. She'll be asleep on

a pile of rags, snoring very loud, and the stolen child will be afraid to wake her. So she'll put down her basket, and creep away into a corner, and sit there shivering, and trying to keep her teeth from chattering. But by and by she'll remember the little prayer her mother taught her, and after that she won't be quite so unhappy, and —— Why, Maud, what is the matter—whatever are you crying about?"

"I—I don't like it," sobbed Maud, the tender-hearted, flinging herself upon Dulcie's lap. "I don't want the poor little girl to be so cold and hungry." And the sobs changed to a wail.

"Oh, hush, lovey, don't cry like that," pleaded Daisy, soothing and petting her little sister, while Dulcie added in hasty explanation:

"Don't be such a baby, Maud. It's only a story I'm making up. We don't really know anything about the little girl at all."

"But you said—you said she was so cold and so hungry," wailed Maud, "and I don't like to hear about people being cold and hungry."

"Oh, Maud, do stop," protested Molly. "If you cry so loud, Grandma will hear, and think how she'll scold."

But Maud's feelings were not so easily soothed, and she continued to sob, and to declare over and over again that she didn't like sad stories—she didn't want to hear about the stolen child—until the other three were at their wits' end.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Maud," exclaimed Daisy, with a sudden inspiration. "If you'll stop crying, I'll go down to the kitchen and see if there isn't some ice-cream left. If there is, I'll coax Bridget to let me have some, and you shall eat every bit of it, because you're the youngest."

Maud stopped short in the middle of a wail.

"Will you really?" she inquired doubtfully.

"Yes, I will," promised Daisy. "Now wipe your eyes, like a good girl. Where's your handkerchief? Oh, you haven't got one. Well, never mind, here's mine. There, that's all right. You won't cry any more, will you?"

"Suppose there isn't any ice-cream left?" suggested Maud, still doubtfully.

"Well, there's sure to be some cake left, anyhow, and I'm sure Bridget will give me a piece for you. Now keep still, and I'll be back just as quick as I can."

Maud was mollified and Daisy ran quickly down the four flights of stairs to the basement without meeting any one by the way. She tiptoed past Grandma's door, which was fortunately closed, or she would probably have been stopped and questioned. Arrived at the kitchen, she found Bridget and Mary both taking afternoon tea. They were sitting at the kitchen table, and between them was a dish containing several tempting little frosted cakes.

At Daisy's entrance they both looked up, and Mary inquired rather sharply:

"Now what in the world are you after down here at this time of day? Did your grandma send you?"

"No," said Daisy, pausing in the doorway, "nobody sent me. I just came to ask if there was any ice-cream left. I don't want much, only a little for Maud. Dulcie told a story that made her cry, and I promised to bring her something to eat if I could. She loves ice-cream, and I thought perhaps——" Daisy paused in some embarrassment.

Both the maids laughed, and Bridget—who was generally good-natured—pushed back her chair from the table.

"There isn't very much left," she said. "I was keeping it for our supper, but I suppose you may as well have it."

"Oh, thank you," cried Daisy, gratefully; "you're very kind. I'm sorry to take it away from you and Mary, but Maud is so unhappy. I'm sure the ice-cream will make her feel cheerful again."

Bridget retired to the ice-box, from whence she presently returned with a well-filled saucer of pink ice-cream.

"It's too bad there isn't enough for you all," she said, kindly, "but the madame's that stingy, she never will order more than just enough to go round."

You can have a couple of these cakes, anyhow, and that'll be better than nothing."

Daisy's heart beat very fast, as she stole softly up-stairs again with her precious burden. She reached the second floor in safety, and was just beginning to breathe more freely, when there came an interruption. Grandma's door opened suddenly, and a sharp, querulous voice demanded:

"Who's that?"

Daisy's heart gave a big jump, but she tried to speak quite naturally.

"It's only I, Grandma," she faltered, and try as she might, she could not keep the tremor altogether out of her voice.

Mrs. Winslow stepped out into the hall.

"What is that you are carrying so carefully?" she inquired, suspiciously.

"It's—it's just a little ice-cream, and some cakes that were left from the lunch party. Bridget gave them to me for Maud. Maud was crying over a story Dulcie told, and ——"

"Never mind about explanations," interrupted Grandma, frowning. "You all know perfectly well that you are not allowed to eat between meals, or to bring food up-stairs. Take those things directly back to the kitchen. I shall speak to Bridget about this to-morrow morning."

The tears started to Daisy's blue eyes.

"Oh, Grandma," she pleaded, "please do let us

have it, just this once. Maud loves ice-cream so much, and she hardly ever has any. You see, it was this way: Maud made up a story about a little beggar girl we see sometimes. We think she must be a stolen child, because she has blue eyes and golden hair; stolen children always have in books, and we like to make up things about her. This was a very sad story, but we didn't think Maud ——"

"I am not interested in all that nonsense," interrupted Grandma, impatiently. "Do as I tell you, and never let me hear of your bringing food up-stairs again without permission."

Daisy's lip quivered, but she dared not disobey, and with a sigh that was half a sob, she turned away, and went slowly down-stairs again. When she returned to the nursery, five minutes later, she was relieved to find that Maud had stopped crying, and was standing with Molly, eagerly looking out of the window.

"They're beginning to dance," announced Maud. "The gas is lit in the parlor, and they haven't pulled down one shade."

"I suppose there wasn't any cream left," said Dulcie in a low voice. In their interest in the Van Arsdales' party, the two younger ones had apparently forgotten the subject of food.

"There was a little," Daisy admitted, "and Bridget let me have it for Maud, and some cakes, too; but on the way up-stairs I met Grandma, and

she made me take the things back to the kitchen. She said we were forbidden to bring food up here, or to eat between meals."

Dulcie's eyes flashed. For a moment she did not speak, and then she said, slowly:

"I hate Grandma, and some day I'm going to tell her so."

"Oh, Dulcie," gasped Daisy, in horrified reproach, "you mustn't say such things. It's terribly wicked to hate people."

"I know it is," said Dulcie, "and I suppose I must be a very wicked person. Perhaps I shall never go to heaven, but I do hate Grandma just the same, and there isn't any use in pretending I don't."

CHAPTER II

A VISITOR

PEOPLE dined earlier in 1880 than they do nowadays. The Winslows' dinner hour was six o'clock, and by seven the table had been cleared, and the family settled down in the dining-room, where they usually spent their evenings. The children's bedtime was eight, and that hour after dinner always seemed to them the longest hour of the whole day. Mrs. Winslow had a theory that families should spend their evenings together, and so they were never allowed to wander off and find amusements for themselves. She also had another theory, that young people should never speak except when addressed by their elders, and as neither she nor her daughter were at all fond of the society of children, the little girls were seldom encouraged to join in the conversation. Dulcie had once remarked that Grandma only talked when she had something to scold about, and Aunt Kate spent a great deal of time knitting caps for sailors, and was so busy counting stitches that she was apt to forget the presence of any one else in the room. Aunt Kate was con-

sidered among her friends to be a very charitable woman. She was on the Board of any number of societies for improving the condition of the poor, and was constantly attending "Meetings," but it was seldom that she troubled herself to think of the four little girls who lived in the big front room on the top floor, and who, if not objects of charity, would certainly have been better and happier for a little mothering now and then.

Grandma was very fond of playing solitaire, and as soon as the dinner-table was cleared, she generally got out the cards, and that meant that she was not to be disturbed by any one, even her daughter. Dulcie could often find amusement in a book, or even in the evening paper, but to the three younger ones that hour between dinner and bedtime was decidedly tiresome.

On this particular January evening things seemed, if possible, even duller than usual. The children had been in the house all day, and were, in consequence, feeling particularly wide awake, and anxious for some kind of active exercise. When Aunt Kate requested Molly to wind some wool for her, the little girl jumped up with such alacrity that she knocked over a chair, and received a severe reproof from Grandma.

"Careless child," scolded the old lady, looking up from her cards with a frown; "can't you move without breaking the furniture?"

Molly, who was rather sensitive, blushed scarlet, and murmured an apology. But even winding wool is more interesting than doing nothing at all, so she soon cheered up, and ventured a timid attempt at conversation.

"It's going to be a pretty cap," she remarked politely. "If I were a sailor I think I should like it."

"Should you?" said Miss Kate, sarcastically. "It is rather a pity you are not a sailor, then, isn't it?"

Aunt Kate had a way of saying things in that sarcastic tone, and Molly instantly relapsed into embarrassed silence. Dulcie was glancing over the front page of the *Evening Post*, being very careful not to rattle the paper, because the rattling of a newspaper made Grandma nervous. Maud stifled a yawn, and began surreptitiously rubbing her eyes. Maud, being the youngest, was sometimes permitted to go to bed before her sisters, but to-night Grandma was absorbed in her solitaire, and did not notice the yawn. Daisy kept her eyes fixed on the clock. Twenty minutes to eight. Only twenty more minutes, and then they would all be free. They would hurry and get undressed, and when they were in bed perhaps Dulcie would tell them stories about Mamma. She often did after they had said their prayers, and the light was out, and it was all very cozy and pleasant. Mamma had talked to Dulcie

just before she died, and told her she must be a little mother to the others, and always be good to them and never let them forget their prayers. Molly had once said that perhaps Mamma was looking down on them from heaven, and that when they were in bed, and Dulcie was talking about her, she came to them, and loved them, although, of course, they could not see her. Daisy and Maud had thought this a beautiful idea, and had been much surprised to hear Dulcie sigh, and say rather sadly:

“I hope she doesn’t know about things.”

“Why not?” Molly had demanded in astonishment. “I should think you would love to think that perhaps Mamma came to see us.”

“I wouldn’t like to have her unhappy about us,” Dulcie answered, gravely, “and I’m afraid she would be unhappy if she knew about Grandma. You can’t remember Danby, and how happy we were there, but I can, and I know how different everything was when Mamma was here.”

Daisy wished that she could remember that happy time, too, but the memories were all very dim and indistinct.

For five minutes the only sounds to break the stillness of the room were the ticking of the clock and the click of Aunt Kate’s knitting needles. Then the newspaper rustled, and Grandma looked up from her cards for the second time.

“Leave that paper alone, Dulcie,” she said, im-

patiently. "You know the rustling of a newspaper is very unpleasant to me."

"Excuse me, Grandma," apologized Dulcie. "I'll try not to do it again. I was so interested in something I was reading, I turned over the sheet to finish it."

"What were you reading?" Grandma inquired suspiciously.

"About a man who was killed. They think he was murdered. They found his body ——"

"Good gracious, child!" cried Grandma, quite forgetting to shuffle her cards in her dismay. "Don't you know you are not to read such things? Put that paper down at once, and don't let me see you touch a newspaper again until you are old enough to know what to read, and what to leave alone."

Dulcie blushed.

"Miss Hammond says everybody ought to read the newspaper," she began. "It's very interesting about that man. Won't you please let me finish it, Grandma?"

"Certainly not, and don't argue. Such things are not proper reading for a child of your age. Your father would be very angry if he ever heard of your reading such disgusting stories."

"Would he?" said Dulcie, and she instantly put down the paper. There was no one in the world whom Dulcie loved as she loved her father.

"Of course he would," said Mrs. Winslow. "Remember, you are not to look at a newspaper again until I give you permission. What are you rubbing your eyes in that way for, Maud?"

"I'm sleepy," said Maud. Maud was less afraid of Grandma than any of the others, and if Mrs. Winslow had a favorite among her stepson's children, it was little curly-headed Maud, who was scarcely more than a baby when the family had arrived from the West five years ago.

Grandma glanced at the clock.

"Nearly five minutes to eight," she said; "you may as well all go to bed."

Four little girls sprang from their chairs with so much alacrity that, if Grandma had been a real grandmother, instead of "only a step," as Dulcie called her, her feelings might have been hurt. But Mrs. Winslow had no objection to the children's evident dislike of her society. She meant to do her duty to her husband's grandchildren, but she never thought of them in any other light than as a troublesome incumbrance. They each gave her a sedate "duty kiss," and murmured a polite "Good-night, Grandma," and she heaved a sigh of relief that another day was over. As for Aunt Kate, she frankly confessed that she hated to be kissed, and the children never dreamed of troubling her in any such way.

"Oh, it is nice to get up here again, all by our-

selves, isn't it?" cried Daisy, with a happy little skip, as they entered their own big nursery, and Dulcie lighted the gas. "I feel sometimes as if I couldn't breathe down there with Grandma and Aunt Kate. Let's hurry to bed, and then you'll talk to us about Mamma, won't you, Dulcie?"

Dulcie nodded rather absently. She was still thinking about the newspaper story that Grandma had interrupted.

"Hark!" exclaimed Maud, eagerly. "There's the singing lady."

They all paused to listen, and, sure enough, from somewhere that sounded as if it came from within the wall, could be distinctly heard the notes of a piano, and of a sweet voice singing. The walls in the old house were rather thin, and by pressing their ears against the party wall, which divided the Winslows' from the house next door, they could even distinguish the words of the song.

"It's 'Robin Adair,'" said Molly. "Isn't it pretty? I think I like it best of all the songs she sings."

"I like 'Darby and Joan' best," affirmed Daisy; "it always makes me think of such nice, comfortable things. I do wish we knew her. I'm sure she must be nice; she's got such a lovely voice."

"Grandma would never let us go to see her," said Dulcie, with conviction. "She says it isn't proper to call on people she doesn't know."

"Perhaps it's more interesting not to know her," said cheerful Daisy. "It's so exciting to make up stories about her. She must be rather poor to live away up on the top floor of that boarding-house. I wish we could see her in the street sometimes."

"Maybe we do see her," said Dulcie; "we haven't any idea what she looks like. Now, hurry and get undressed, children. It's pretty cold up here; I think the furnace must be very low."

Daisy and Molly began unfastening their dresses, but Maud still remained with her ear glued to the wall.

"Come, Maud, don't dawdle," commanded Dulcie, a little impatiently. "I'll help you undress."

"I want to listen to the singing lady," objected Maud. "I love music."

"You can listen in bed just as well, and if you stay up in this cold room, you may get another sore throat, and you wouldn't like that, you know. My goodness! there's the door-bell. Who can it be at this time of night?"

Evening visitors were not frequent at the Winslows', and Molly was dispatched to peep over the banister.

"Perhaps it's that minister who comes to see Aunt Kate," said Dulcie, and this opinion was rather strengthened when Molly reported having heard a gentleman's voice speaking to Mary.

Aunt Kate's visitors were not interesting to the children, and they had almost forgotten the incident of the door-bell, when there came an unexpected tap at the nursery door.

"Children," called Mary's voice, rather breathless from the three long flights of stairs, "your grandma says you're to come down right away. Your uncle's here."

There was a simultaneous exclamation of astonishment from four very excited little girls.

"Our uncle! What uncle? Oh, Mary, do tell us quick." And the door was flung open, revealing four children in various stages of undressing.

"His name is Maitland," said Mary, "and he's a youngish gentleman. I never saw him before."

"It must be Uncle Stephen; Mamma's brother from California," said Dulcie. "I think he's the only uncle we've got. Oh, isn't it exciting? Hurry, children, do please hurry!"

"I can't go down with my boots unbuttoned," complained Daisy. "O dear! where's the shoe buttoner? Fasten your dress, Molly, and take those curlers off Maud's hair."

"I'll help you," said Mary, good-naturedly. "I'm glad you've got an uncle to look after you. You'd better tell him a few things before he goes away again."

"What sort of things?" inquired Daisy, innocently.

Mary laughed.

"Oh, I guess you know as well as I do," she said, evasively. "If you don't, so much the better."

"Did our uncle ask for Grandma?" Dulcie wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, and she's in the parlor with him now. So's Miss Kate."

Dulcie's face fell.

"There isn't much use in our going down, then," she said, with a sigh. "Grandma won't let us talk. She never does when there's company."

"Perhaps she will this time, because it's our uncle," said Daisy, who was always hoping pleasant things were going to happen. "Anyhow, it will be lovely to see somebody belonging to Mamma. I remember Papa told us about Uncle Stephen. He's lived in California ever since he was twenty, and none of us has ever seen him. There! my boots are done. Now I can help Maud, if you'll button Molly's dress, Mary."

Four little hearts were beating rather quickly, as the children hurried down-stairs to the parlor, from whence the sound of voices could be heard.

"Grandma's talking in her 'company voice,'" whispered Dulcie. "She must like Uncle Stephen or she wouldn't sound so polite."

Grandma and Aunt Kate were both smiling when the children entered the parlor, and their companion,

a tall, broad-shouldered young man, rose from the sofa, and came forward to meet them.

"So these are Ethel's little girls," he said, and Grandma answered, still in her "company voice":

"Yes, here they are, all four. Children, this is your Uncle Stephen from California."

"I know," said Dulcie, holding out her hand, with her most grown-up air; "Papa told us all about you. I think you were very kind to take the trouble to come to see us. I'm Dulcie, the eldest, and this is Daisy. Her real name is Margaret, after Grandma Maitland, but everybody calls her Daisy. These others are Molly and Maud. Molly's named for Mamma's sister, who died, and Maud is just a name Mamma liked in a book."

Dulcie paused, rather breathless from her long speech. The three younger children gazed at her in undisguised admiration. Under no combination of circumstances could any one of them have dared to make such a wonderful speech, and in Grandma's presence, too. The visitor smiled, and they all thought he had a very pleasant smile indeed.

"Of course I wanted to come to see you," he said in a voice that was as pleasant as his smile. And, instead of taking Dulcie's outstretched hand, he bent and kissed her.

That broke the ice, for of course, all the others had to be kissed, too, and in a very few minutes Maud was perched on Uncle Stephen's knee, and the

other three were sitting beside him on the sofa. If Grandma and Aunt Kate were displeased with this state of affairs, they did not show it. Grandma continued to talk in her "company voice," and Aunt Kate smiled as her needles flew.

Mr. Maitland explained that he had come east on a business trip, and was only spending a few days in New York.

"Indeed, I am starting back to California tomorrow night," he said, "but I couldn't leave without having a glimpse of Ethel's children. Jim stopped to see me in San Francisco, on his way to Hong Kong, and I asked for your address, thinking I might be in this part of the world sometime."

"Papa's coming home next year," ventured Maud, who suddenly felt very safe in Grandma's presence, for was not Uncle Stephen's kind arm around her, and had he not said that she had eyes like Mamma's? "When he comes home we're going to have a little house of our own, and perhaps Lizzie ——"

Maud paused, admonished by a warning nudge from Dulcie. Grandma had forbidden the mention of Lizzie's name.

"We had a letter from Papa last week," put in Dulcie, quickly, hoping that Grandma had not noticed Maud's slip. "He tells us such funny things about China. Does he ever write to you, Uncle Stephen?"

"Yes, occasionally. I heard from him about a month ago."

"Did he tell you about the Chinese people eating rats and mice?" inquired Molly. "We used to worry for fear Papa might have to eat them, but he says he doesn't."

Uncle Stephen laughed, and even Grandma and Aunt Kate looked amused, but just then Grandma gave the little warning cough, which always meant "children should be seen and not heard," and Molly instantly relapsed into embarrassed silence.

Altogether, the call was a trifle disappointing. Aunt Kate talked about missions, but Uncle Stephen didn't seem particularly interested in that subject, and in about twenty minutes he took out his watch, and remarked that he was afraid he must be going.

"I have an engagement with a business friend at nine," he said, "but I want to see these little nieces of mine again before I leave New York. To-morrow is Saturday, and I expect to finish all my business by noon. My train doesn't leave till half-past six. May I have these young people to spend the afternoon with me? I will promise to take good care of them."

That was a tremendous moment. Would Grandma consent? That was the question that four little eager girls were asking themselves. Daisy ventured to give the old lady a pleading glance. Dulcie and Molly clasped their hands nervously.

There was a moment of breathless suspense, and then, to everybody's surprise, Grandma answered quite pleasantly:

"I am sure they would enjoy it very much, and I see no objection, if you really want to be troubled with them."

"I want them very much," said Uncle Stephen, with his kind, pleasant smile. "I will call for them at about noon, and we will lunch at the Fifth Avenue, where I am staying, and do something together in the afternoon. Now I must be off, as I see it is getting near the time for my appointment, so good-night, chicks. Be sure to be ready for me at twelve to-morrow."

"I never believed she'd let us," declared Daisy, when they were talking things over in the nursery, ten minutes later. "My heart just stood still; I was so sure she was going to say no."

"Perhaps she didn't dare," suggested Molly. "He's our uncle, you know. Oh, aren't uncles lovely? I never had any idea they were so nice."

"We didn't know anything about them," said Daisy. "We don't know much about any relations except fathers. Now let's hurry to bed, and get to sleep as quick as we can, so it won't seem so long till to-morrow."

CHAPTER III

A WONDERFUL DAY

“IT’S the most interesting thing that ever happened to us,” declared Molly. “It’s almost like a book thing.”

“It would be even more exciting if we had thought Uncle Stephen was dead,” said Dulcie, in a tone of some regret. “You remember how exciting it was in ‘Kathie’s Three Wishes,’ when her Uncle Robert came home rich, after everybody had thought he was dead for years and years. I wonder if Uncle Stephen is rich.”

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” said Daisy. “He must have a good deal of money to be able to take us all to the Fifth Avenue Hotel to lunch. I wonder where he’ll take us afterwards. It might be to the Aquarium. Do you remember the time Papa took us there, Dulcie, and we saw those wonderful fish, and snakes, and things?”

Maud’s face clouded.

“I don’t like snakes,” she protested; “I hope Uncle Stephen won’t take us there. I dream about snakes sometimes, and it’s horrid.”

"Don't be a baby," began Molly, rather sharply, but Daisy interposed.

"I wouldn't worry, Maudie, till we know where we really are going. Perhaps Uncle Stephen doesn't intend to take us anywhere except to the hotel. We may just stay there all the afternoon, and watch the people. That would be very interesting."

Dulcie glanced at herself in the mirror. It was only half-past eleven, but they were already dressed, because, as Daisy wisely remarked, "Uncle Stephen might happen to come ahead of time, and it wouldn't be polite to keep a gentleman waiting."

"I wish I hadn't let my best hat get rained on that day," remarked Dulcie, with a sigh. "It's so spotted, I don't think it's at all the right thing to wear to a hotel. If Papa were here, I know he would have bought me a new one, but Grandma doesn't care how shabby our things are."

"Oh, it isn't so very spotty, and perhaps nobody will notice," said Daisy, hopefully. "Don't let's think about anything that isn't pleasant to-day. Isn't it fortunate the sun has come out? If it had kept on raining, Grandma would have made us all wear our old clothes, and that would have been a great deal worse than just a few spots on one hat."

"Yes, but it isn't your hat," objected Dulcie. "Yours looks almost as good as new, and Molly's and Maud's are all right, too."

For a moment Daisy hesitated, and then, with

sudden determination, she took off her own hat, and held it out to Dulcie.

"Let's change," she proposed cheerfully. "You're the eldest, and ought to look the best, and I really don't mind a bit."

Dulcie drew back, blushing.

"As if I would do anything so mean," she declared, indignantly. "I believe you're one of the most unselfish people in the world, Daisy. It was all my own fault, anyhow. If I had taken an umbrella that day, as Grandma told me to, I wouldn't have spoiled my hat. Now, suppose we go down and wait for Uncle Stephen on the sidewalk. It's rather hot up here, with all our things on."

This suggestion was greeted with favor, and a few minutes later the front door had closed behind four very happy little girls. Grandma and Aunt Kate were both out, so there was no one but Mary to see them start, but Mary happened to be in a good humor that morning, and greatly comforted Dulcie by the assurance that nobody would notice the spots on her hat, and that they all looked "just as nice as could be."

"We'll walk up and down," said Dulcie; "it's too cold to stand still, but we mustn't go far, or we might miss Uncle Stephen. Oh, it is grand to be going somewhere, isn't it?"

"Do you suppose there'll be ice-cream for lunch?" inquired Maud, anxiously.

"Of course there will be," said Molly. "You can have anything you want at a hotel. You just pay a dollar, and they'll bring you whatever you ask for. I know, because Papa took me to the Clarendon once, the time you all had the measles, and mine hadn't come out yet."

"Can you even ask for two helpings?" questioned Maud, with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, I guess so, but perhaps it wouldn't be polite to take more than one. Uncle Stephen might think it was piggish."

"Of course he would," said Dulcie, who had grown suddenly grave; "it wouldn't do at all. And that makes me think of something I want to say to you all. Give me your hand, Maud, so we can all walk together. It's about our loyalty to Grandma. You know what Papa used to tell us about always being loyal to our family, and never telling things that happen at home. We mustn't let Uncle Stephen think we don't have ice-cream, and nice things like that every day. We mustn't mention Grandma's being cross, or—or any disagreeable things at all. Will you all remember?"

"Yes," promised Daisy, readily, but Molly looked a little doubtful.

"I don't see why we should have to be so very particular with Uncle Stephen," she objected; "he's our real uncle, and Grandma's only a step."

"But we live with Grandma," rebuked Dulcie.

"Papa said it was very disloyal to talk about people we live with. Don't look so solemn, Maudie. Of course, if Uncle Stephen or the waiter should ask us if we would like another helping of ice-cream, it would be all right to say yes."

Maud's face brightened.

"I sort of think Uncle Stephen will ask us," she said. "He seemed so very kind, and I'm sure he likes me best, because he said I looked like Mamma. Let's cross over. If the singing lady should happen to be at her window, she might like to see how nice we look."

The others laughed, but complied with the request.

"There isn't anybody at the windows," said Molly, glancing up at the top floor of the boarding-house. "What makes you so much interested in that lady, Maud? She may not be a bit interesting."

"I love to hear her sing," said Maud, "and besides, I've got a secret," she added, but in so low a tone that the others did not catch the words. At that moment there was an excited exclamation from Daisy, of "here he comes; he's just turned the corner." And everything else was forgotten in the joy of running to meet Uncle Stephen.

"Well, well," laughed Mr. Maitland, kissing them all round, "so here you are, all four. No danger of being kept waiting, I see."

"Oh, we wouldn't do that," protested Dulcie,

quite shocked at the mere suggestion. "We got ready early, in case you should happen to come before twelve. Grandma and Aunt Kate have both gone out, so there isn't any use of your going in to see them."

"You are the people I want to see this time," said Uncle Stephen, with a rather peculiar smile. "I came a little early on purpose, so as to have plenty of time for lunch. I have tickets for 'The Pirates of Penzance' this afternoon."

"'The Pirates of Penzance,'" repeated Dulcie, with a little gasp. "Why—why, that's at a theatre, isn't it?"

"To be sure it is, and a very charming little operetta it is, too. I hope you haven't all seen it already."

"Oh, no," said Dulcie, "we never—that is, I mean we don't often go to theatres. Daisy and I saw 'Rip Van Winkle' once with Papa. It's very wonderful—I mean it's very kind of you to take us."

And despite all Dulcie's attempts to maintain what she considered the proper demeanor of a grown-up young lady, she could not refrain from a little skip of delight.

As for the other three, they made no attempt whatever to conceal their delight, and began plying Uncle Stephen with a shower of questions about "The Pirates of Penzance," which lasted till they reached the corner of Fifth Avenue, where he was

obliged to interrupt them, to ask whether they would prefer walking to the hotel or taking a stage.

"Oh, a stage, please—that is, if you don't mind," pleaded Molly. "We just love riding in the stages. We hardly ever get a ride now, since Papa and Lizzie went away, because Grandma won't let us go by ourselves."

"Who is Lizzie?" Mr. Maitland asked, as they paused on the corner, to await an approaching stage.

"She was our nurse," Dulcie explained, "but she went away last summer. We really don't need a nurse any more, we're getting so big."

Mr. Maitland glanced down at the four little figures, as if he did not consider them "so very big," after all, but just then the stage came within hailing distance, and he made no remarks on the subject.

It was only a short distance to the hotel, but the children thoroughly enjoyed the little ride, especially Maud, who, somewhat to Dulcie's disapproval, requested to be permitted to pay the fares. Because, as she explained, "it made one feel so grand to spend money." Uncle Stephen laughed so much, and was so kind and genial, that even Dulcie forgot to be dignified, and by the time they reached their destination, they were all the best of friends.

"I am going to leave you in the reception-room for a few moments," Mr. Maitland said, leading the way across the marble hall of the big hotel, "while

I look up two ladies who are to lunch with us. They are friends of mine from San Francisco, who have met your father, and are anxious to see you all."

Nobody said anything, but all were conscious of a sensation of disappointment, which Molly was the first to put into words, the moment they found themselves alone in the reception-room.

"If there are going to be ladies," she said, ruefully, "Uncle Stephen will talk to them all the time, and we won't have half so much fun."

"Perhaps they are very nice ladies," suggested Daisy. "He said they knew Papa, and wanted to know us. Anyhow, we're going to a real theatre, and nothing can spoil that."

"I'm afraid ladies notice other people's clothes more than gentlemen do," said Dulcie, with a sigh, and a glance in the long mirror. "Do you think those spots show very much, Daisy?"

"No, not so very much," answered Daisy, divided between her desire to speak the truth, and fear of making her sister still more uncomfortable. "Perhaps the ladies won't notice the spots at all, if the light isn't too bright."

Dulcie sighed again, but was forced to make the best of the situation, and in another moment Uncle Stephen returned, accompanied by such a very pretty young lady that, in their surprise and admiration, the children quite forgot to worry about their own shortcomings.

"This is Miss Florence Leslie, children," said Mr. Maitland. "Her mother, Mrs. Leslie, will be down in a few moments."

"You see, I couldn't wait for Mother," the young lady explained, smiling, and showing such fascinating dimples, that Daisy and Molly both longed to kiss her. "I was so anxious to see you all. Now let me see if I can guess which is which, from your father's description. This tall one must be Dulcie, I am sure, and the little curly-haired one is Maud. These others are Daisy and Molly."

"Why, you know all our names," exclaimed Molly, in astonishment. "Did you ever see us before?"

"No, but I have heard a great deal about you from your father. We saw a good deal of him in San Francisco, before he sailed for Hong Kong, and he and my brother are in business together now. I wonder if you would each be willing to give me a kiss."

"Of course we would," said Dulcie, heartily, and four little faces were eagerly raised. Miss Leslie kissed them all, "not just duty kisses," Molly said afterwards, but as if she really liked doing it, and in less than five minutes they were chattering away to this new acquaintance as if they had known her all their lives.

Then Mrs. Leslie appeared, and they all went into the dining-room. Mrs. Leslie was not as pretty as

her daughter, but she had a very sweet face, and was so kind and motherly that the little girls soon felt almost as much at home with her as with Miss Florence.

"And now who is going to order the luncheon?" Uncle Stephen asked, when they had taken their places at one of the round tables in the big, crowded dining-room. "Will you do it, Mrs. Leslie?"

"Suppose we let Dulcie order," suggested Miss Florence. "When I was a little girl, and we went to a hotel, I remember half the fun was in ordering things to eat."

Dulcie gasped, as the waiter handed her the long bill of fare.

"I—I don't think I could," she faltered; "there are so many things, I shouldn't know where to begin. What's the matter, Maud?"

"It's about the ice-cream," whispered Maud. "It doesn't matter what else we have." Maud's whisper was sufficiently audible to be heard by the whole party, and all the grown-ups laughed, somewhat to the little girl's embarrassment. Then Miss Leslie said, kindly:

"I will help you, if you would like to have me," and on Dulcie's grateful request, she gave the waiter an order, which seemed to the children almost appallingly large.

What a delicious meal it was, and how they all enjoyed it! Even Dulcie forgot her intention of

taking a light lunch, for fear Uncle Stephen might think she was hungry, which would reflect unfavorably on Grandma's providing. Miss Leslie certainly did not forget to order ice-cream, and, better still, she took two helpings of it herself, and advised them all to do likewise. Mr. Maitland and Mrs. Leslie seemed to have a good deal to say to each other, but Miss Florence devoted herself almost exclusively to the children, and before luncheon was over, had succeeded in winning all their hearts.

"I wish you were going to the theatre with us," Molly remarked, regretfully, as they were leaving the dining-room, and she gave her new friend's hand an affectionate squeeze.

"I am going," said Miss Leslie, smiling; "your uncle invited me. He asked Mother, too, but she declined on account of a headache."

Molly gave vent to her satisfaction by a little squeal of delight, and Maud—who was nothing if not truthful—remarked in a sudden burst of confidence:

"We didn't think we were going to like it when Uncle Stephen said ladies were coming to lunch, but you're not a bit like an ordinary lady."

"Maud!" cried Dulcie, reprovingly, but Miss Leslie laughed merrily, and did not seem in the least offended.

That was a wonderful, never-to-be-forgotten afternoon. Long after their elders had ceased to

think of it, the four little girls loved to recall its delights. The bright little opera, with its charming music, and amusing dialogue. The funny pirate chief, who frightened Maud at first, and then fascinated her for the rest of the afternoon. The pompous major-general, with his numerous family of daughters. And, last but not least, the gallant policemen, who were as much afraid of the pirate band as the pirates were afraid of them. It was all one continuous delight. But even better than the play was the pleasant companionship. Long before the afternoon was over, they had all come to the conclusion that, with the exception of Papa, and possibly the faithful Lizzie, Uncle Stephen and Miss Leslie were "the two nicest grown-ups" they had ever met.

But everything, even "The Pirates of Penzance," must come to an end at last, and all too soon the curtain had fallen on the last rollicking chorus, and they were making their way out through the crowd, into the dusk of the winter afternoon.

"Wouldn't it be lovely if nice things never came to an end?" remarked Dulcie, as they stood on the cold corner, while Uncle Stephen went in quest of a cab.

Miss Leslie smiled.

"There wouldn't be any next time to look forward to, then," she said.

"But we don't have any next times," began Molly,

and checked herself, warned by a reproving glance from Dulcie.

Miss Leslie looked rather surprised, but before she could ask any questions, Uncle Stephen returned, and they were all packed into a cab, Mr. Maitland explaining that he and Miss Florence were in a hurry, and must get home as soon as possible.

"It's been the loveliest afternoon we ever had in our lives," declared Daisy, as the cab drew up before their own door. "Oh, Uncle Stephen, won't we see you again—have you really got to go back to California to-night?"

"I am afraid so," Uncle Stephen answered, with a kind glance at the row of sober little faces, "but perhaps I shall come back again before such a very long time."

"Don't forget there's always a next time to look forward to," said Miss Leslie, with her bright smile. "We've all had a delightful afternoon to look back upon. I hope you won't forget me."

"Indeed we won't!" cried Dulcie and Daisy both together, and Molly added, plaintively:

"Oh, have you got to go back to California, too?"

"Yes, dear, Mother and I are leaving to-night, on the same train with Mr. Maitland. But I want you to remember me, for I have an idea that we shall meet again some day, and in the meantime I wonder

if you would write to me occasionally. I love to get letters from little girls."

"We'd love to," said Daisy, blushing with pleasure. "We none of us write very well except Dulcie, but if you wouldn't mind a few mistakes in spelling ——"

Miss Leslie said she wouldn't mind in the least, and by that time Mary had opened the front door, in answer to Uncle Stephen's ring, and the good-byes had to be said.

"I feel just the way I'm sure Cinderella must have felt when she got back from the ball," remarked Dulcie, throwing herself wearily on the nursery sofa. "That's the only trouble about having good times; everything seems so dull when they're over."

"I don't mind," said cheerful Daisy. "Just think what fun we're going to have talking it all over. I don't think we shall ever feel quite so lonely again, now that we know Uncle Stephen and Miss Leslie."

"I don't see what good they can be to us away off in California," objected Molly, who was sharing some of Dulcie's depression.

"But we've promised to write to them both," argued Daisy, "and that will be very interesting. I wonder how soon it will do to write our first letter."

"I think we might write just a short one to Uncle

Stephen to-morrow," said Molly. "It would be polite to tell him again what a beautiful time we had, don't you think so?"

Nobody answered, and there was a short silence, which Maud broke.

"I don't think I want any dinner," she remarked, with a long sigh. "There's going to be corned beef, there always is on Saturday, and I hate corned beef. I'd like some more ice-cream, but I don't want anything else to eat. My head aches, and I think I'm going to have another sore throat."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SINGING LADY

MAUD'S sore throats were one of the greatest trials to her sisters. Not only were they of frequent occurrence, but they were always regarded by Grandma in the light of an especial grievance to herself, for which somebody must be held responsible. If Maud had lived in the present day, some doctor would probably have decided that her tonsils needed to be removed, but in 1880 people did not think so much about operations, and the family physician contented himself with prescribing simple remedies, and the advice that the child should be kept out of draughts, and not allowed to get her feet wet. Maud's prediction on the present occasion proved only too true. In the middle of the night Daisy was aroused by a feverish demand from her little sister, for a drink of water, and by morning Maud could not swallow without considerable difficulty, and the too familiar white spots had appeared on her throat. Of course Grandma had to be told, and the consequence was a severe lecture to the other three, which lasted all through breakfast.

"I might have known what would happen when

I let you all go off yesterday," grumbled Mrs. Winslow, as she prepared Maud's gargle in the nursery after breakfast. "I don't suppose it ever occurred to one of you to see that the child did not sit in her warm coat all the afternoon."

"Miss Leslie made her take off her coat," protested Daisy, "and I don't really think she got overheated or anything."

"Well, she evidently caught cold in some way. At any rate, this has taught me a lesson. Now remember, Maud, you are to gargle your throat regularly every two hours, and take one of these powders every hour. If I hear of your getting out of bed I shall punish you severely."

"Who is going to stay with Maud this morning, Grandma?" Daisy asked, following Mrs. Winslow out into the hall. "I suppose one of us will have to stay home from church."

Grandma reflected for a moment. She was very particular about church-going, but under the present circumstances it was evident that Maud could not be left alone.

"I think you and Daisy had better come to church with me," she said. "Maud doesn't need anything except her gargle and the powders, and Molly can attend to them."

So it was settled, much to Molly's satisfaction, and at half-past ten Dulcie and Daisy departed for church, with Grandma and Aunt Kate, and the two

younger children were left to themselves. Maud, who was feverish and rather cross, was inclined to resent this arrangement, which deprived her of the society of her two older sisters.

"I want Dulcie to stay and tell me stories," she pleaded. "Nobody can tell stories but Dulcie."

"I'll tell you stories this afternoon," said Dulcie. "I don't believe Grandma will make me go to church twice to-day, on account of your being sick."

"But I want stories this morning," fretted Maud; "I want to hear about Mamma. Ask Grandma to let you stay at home instead of Molly."

"It wouldn't be any use; it would only make her crosser than she is already. Molly will read to you. There's a very nice book I got from the library. It's called 'Ministering Children,' and it's a regular Sunday story."

"I don't like the way Molly reads," complained the invalid. "She can't pronounce the long words, and she keeps stopping to spell things. I can read 'most as well as she can myself."

But whether Maud liked it or not, there was nothing to be done, as they all knew well. Grandma never changed her mind about things, and when she had once given an order she expected implicit obedience.

"I'll do anything you want me to," said Molly, good-naturedly, as the retreating footsteps of the church-goers died away in the distance. "We can't

play lotto, because it's Sunday, but perhaps it wouldn't be wicked to cut out some paper dolls."

Maud brightened a little at this suggestion, and for the next half hour all went well. Then it was time for Maud's medicine, and she began to rebel.

"I don't like those nasty powders, and I'm not going to take any more till Grandma comes home."

"Then we shall both get an awful scolding," said Molly, desperately. "Grandma knows just how many powders there are, and she'll count to see if you've taken them all right. Do swallow this one, like a good girl, and I'll give you a drink of water to take away the taste."

Perhaps Maud realized the force of her sister's argument. At any rate, she made no further objection to swallowing the medicine, over which she made a wry face.

"When I grow up, I'm never going to take medicine," she announced, decidedly. "I'm not going to do a single thing I don't want to."

"Maybe you'll have to," said Molly. "Grown-up people can't always do just as they like. Papa didn't want to go to China and leave us all, but he had to, and Lizzie didn't want to go away. Listen, the lady next door is beginning to sing."

Maud's face brightened.

"I'm glad," she said. "She always sings hymns on Sunday. I wonder why she doesn't go to church. Maybe she's sick, too."

For ten minutes the room was very still, while the two children listened to the music, which reached them distinctly through the party wall. Then Maud began to show signs of restlessness again.

"I wish she'd sing 'Only an Armor-Bearer,'" she complained, fretfully. "'Only an Armor-Bearer' is my favorite hymn; it's got such a nice, lively tune. She 'most always sings it on Sunday."

"Perhaps she will in a little while," said Molly, and again there was silence. But, contrary to their expectations, the lady next door did not sing "Only an Armor-Bearer," and after a few minutes the music ceased.

"O dear!" cried Maud, "now she's stopped, and I did want 'Only an Armor-Bearer' so much. Can't we ask her to sing some more?"

"Why, Maud, how could we? We don't know her. Oh, Maud, don't begin to cry. You'll be worse if you do."

"I am worse now," declared Maud, seizing eagerly upon this new idea. "I'm much worse. Maybe I'm going to die and go to heaven, like Mamma. If I do you'll be sorry you wouldn't ask the lady to sing 'Only an Armor-Bearer.'"

"But how can I ask her, Maudie? It would be dreadfully rude to call through the wall, and I don't believe she'd understand, anyway. If I went in next door I should have to ring the bell to get back, and then Mary would see me, and she'd be sure to

tell Grandma. Besides, I wouldn't know whom to ask for. We don't even know the lady's name."

Maud stopped crying, and raised herself on one elbow.

"If you'll promise never to tell Grandma," she said, "I'll tell you something. It's my secret; I've had it for ever so many days."

"A secret! What kind of a secret?" Molly was beginning to be interested.

"It's a very lovely secret," said Maud, proudly. "You big ones are always having secrets, so I got one, too. I won't tell it, though, unless you promise not to tell Grandma."

"Of course I'll promise. You know I never tell Grandma things, or Aunt Kate either."

"I don't know that we ought to tell Dulcie and Daisy," said Maud, doubtfully; "they might think Grandma ought to know. That's why I didn't talk about it. It was so exciting. I peeked in, but I was scared to go any farther."

"Peeked in?" repeated Molly; "where did you peek in?"

"Next door. Through the door in the trunk-room, you know."

"Do you mean the door Grandpa had cut between the houses when Uncle George lived next door? I thought it was locked up after Uncle George died, and the boarding-house people came there."

"It isn't locked up," said Maud, triumphantly. "I found out, and that's my secret."

"Maud!" gasped Molly, her eyes round with astonishment. "You mean you knew such an exciting thing, and never told any one."

Maud nodded.

"I wanted to have a secret," she said, "and I was afraid Dulcie or Daisy would tell Grandma. It was the last time I had a cold, and Grandma wouldn't let me go out. I was up here playing all by myself. I was looking for my littlest china doll. I couldn't find her, and I thought perhaps I'd left her in the trunk-room the day we played Libby Prison in there, so I went to look. I did find her behind one of the biggest trunks, and then I saw the door. I thought it was locked, of course, but I shook the handle just for fun, and all of a sudden it came open, and I looked right in next door."

"What did you see?" demanded Molly, in a tone of breathless interest.

"I didn't see very much," confessed Maud, reluctantly. "It was just a big closet, and there were brooms and dust-pans in it, but it really was next door. First I was going to tell, but then I was afraid if Grandma knew she'd have the door locked up right away, and then we could never go to see the singing lady."

"I'm sure Grandma would have it locked right up," said Molly, "and perhaps the lady who keeps

the boarding-house would, too, but it's very interesting to know it isn't locked now. Why, it must have been unlocked all the time since Uncle George died, and nobody ever found it out before. I don't believe the people next door know it any more than we did."

"Of course they don't," said Maud, "that's what makes it so interesting. Now you see you can go to see the singing lady just as easy as anything, and ask her to sing 'Only an Armor-Bearer.'"

"Oh, Maud, I couldn't," protested Molly; "it would be such a very queer thing to do. The lady might not like it a bit, and Grandma would make such a fuss. She never lets us talk to people she doesn't know."

"You promised you wouldn't tell Grandma, and I know the singing lady wouldn't be angry. You've got to do it, Molly, or else maybe I'll die and go to heaven."

Molly hesitated. It would certainly be a thrilling experience to go uninvited, and without even ringing the door-bell, into the house next door, that mysterious boarding-house, upon whose occupants Grandma and Aunt Kate looked down from their height of social superiority. Molly loved adventure, and yet—what would Grandma say? Would even Dulcie and Daisy altogether approve? Maud noticed the hesitation in her sister's manner, and was quick to take advantage of it.

"If you won't go," she announced, sitting up in bed, "I'll get right straight up and go myself."

Molly rose irresolutely.

"If I go, will you promise faithfully not to get out of bed for a single minute till I come back?"

Maud nodded emphatically.

"I'll promise, cross my heart, and that's the solemnest promise anybody can make, and if you break it something awful will happen to you. Mary told me it would. I'll lie just as still, as still, and when you come back you can tell me all about the singing lady."

"And will you gargle and take your powders all day without making any more fuss?"

"Yes, and I'll give you my best paper doll, and all her dresses. Don't you think I'm kind?"

Molly moved slowly towards the door.

"It seems an awful thing to do," she said, "but I'll only stay a minute, and I can't let you get out of bed."

Molly's heart was beating very fast as she crossed the hall to the dark room, which Grandma used for storing trunks and boxes. There was no one to see her, for both the servants were in the kitchen, and she and Maud had the upper part of the house quite to themselves. The trunk-room was not locked, and she made her way amid various impediments, to the heavy door, which she had always known communicated with the adjoining house. Old Dr.



Eleanor P. Yeeden.

THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN SO QUIETLY AND EASILY THAT SHE NEARLY FELL OVER BACKWARD.—Page 63.

Winslow had had it made in days gone by, when the house next door had belonged to his only brother, of whom he was very fond. This brother had died before the children came to New York, and although the house still belonged to the Winslow family, it had been rented to a lady, who took boarders, much to the disgust of Grandma and Aunt Kate, who looked upon a boarding-house as a blot on the neighborhood. Molly was telling herself that her little sister must have made a mistake. It did not seem possible that the communicating door could have been left unfastened all these years, without the fact having been discovered. With a trembling hand she turned the knob. The door stuck a little, and she was just about to turn away, convinced that Maud had dreamed the whole thing, when suddenly the door swung open, so quietly and easily, that, in her astonishment, she nearly fell over backward.

There, sure enough, was the closet, just as Maud had described it. Molly fairly gasped, and in that one moment everything else was forgotten in the excitement of the wonderful discovery she had made. She did not shrink back, as Maud had done, but pushing her way through brooms and brushes, and stumbling over various articles on the floor, reached another door, which she opened, and the next moment she had stepped out into a hall, which was exactly like the hall of their own top floor.

It was very quiet, and there was no one to be seen.

Molly closed the closet door softly, and stood looking about her. There were four rooms on the floor, and all the doors were closed. The singing lady's room was in the front, she knew, and after one moment's hesitation, she stepped boldly forward, and knocked.

"Come in," called a pleasant voice, and there was a sound as of some piece of furniture being moved rapidly along the floor. Before Molly could quite make up her mind to turn the handle, the door was opened from the inside, and a little lady in a wheel-chair suddenly confronted her.

She was such a tiny lady that for the first moment Molly thought she must be a child, but when the pleasant voice spoke again, it sounded oddly familiar.

"Won't you come in?" she said, and the face that looked at Molly from the wheel-chair was so very sweet and winning, that half her embarrassment melted away at once.

"I hope you'll excuse me for coming," she faltered, "but—but, you see, we live next door, and my little sister is sick. We can hear you sing through the wall, and we all love it. My sister wants me to ask if you won't please sing 'Only an Armor-Bearer,' because it's her favorite hymn."

"Come right in," said the lady, hospitably, "and would you mind closing the door? The halls are rather chilly."

Molly complied, and found herself in a room exactly like their own nursery on the other side of the wall. Indeed, the two houses had been built at the same time, and were alike in every particular. It was evidently used as both bed and sitting-room, for a piano stood between the windows, and by the empty fireplace stood a small mahogany bookcase well filled with rather shabby-looking books. The room might have been more tidy, for the bed was still unmade, and on the table was a tray containing the remains of a breakfast, but the lady herself was as neat as possible, although her blue wrapper was somewhat faded, and the slippers on the little feet that hung helplessly over the edge of the wheel-chair had long ago lost their first freshness.

"You must excuse things being a little upset," the lady said, apologetically. "It's Sunday morning, you know, and the chambermaid has gone to church. She's a nice girl, and very kind and obliging, but I am afraid I give her a good deal of trouble. Take those bedclothes off that comfortable chair, and sit down. It's a great pleasure to have a little girl come to see me. And so your sister likes my singing. I am very glad. I had no idea any one cared about it."

"We all like it," said Molly, who had obeyed her hostess' instructions, and seated herself. "You see, our room is just on the other side of the wall, and we can hear very well indeed. Maud is in

bed to-day, with a sore throat, and she loved the music."

"Bless her heart!" cried the little lady, fairly beaming with pleasure, "she shall have all the music I can give her. I love to sing, though I know I haven't much of a voice. Would you mind telling me your name?"

"My name is Molly Winslow," said Molly, "and my sisters' names are Dulcie, Daisy and Maud. It's Maud who is sick. She's only seven. I'm nine, and Dulcie and Daisy are eleven and ten. Our mamma is dead, and our papa has gone to China. We live next door with Grandma Winslow."

"I know who you are now," said the lady, smiling; "you are old Dr. Winslow's grandchildren. I have always admired your grandfather's writing so much. I have read a number of his books, and I was so much interested when I heard his house was next door."

"Were you?" said Molly. "I'm glad you like Grandpa's books. I didn't know anybody did. Dulcie began one once, but she said it wasn't very interesting. I suppose people ought to like their relations' books."

The lady laughed such a merry laugh that Molly found herself laughing, too, though she did not know why.

"I think Dr. Winslow's books might seem rather dull to a little girl," she said. "Perhaps I might

have found them dull myself, if I were able to get about like other people, but when one has to live in a wheel-chair one is glad of almost anything to read."

"Do you always have to stay in the chair?" asked Molly, sympathetically. "I thought perhaps you had just sprained your ankle or something like that. Papa sprained his ankle once and he had to keep his foot up for three whole weeks."

"I haven't walked a step for nearly three years," said the lady, quietly.

"Can't you even go up and down stairs?"

The lady shook her head.

"I was carried up here the day I left the hospital," she said, sadly, "and I have lived in this room ever since. I shall never walk again, the doctors tell me. But I manage to get on very well," she added, brightening at sight of Molly's distressed face. "You would really be surprised to know all the things I can do without getting out of my chair. Then people are very kind to me. Miss Collins, the lady who keeps this house, was an old friend of my mother's, and she often comes to sit with me in the evening. The chambermaid helps me in many little ways, and with my books, and my dear piano, I really get on very comfortably indeed."

Molly was deeply impressed.

"Could you walk when you were a little girl?" she inquired, anxiously.

A shadow crossed the lady's sweet face.

"Oh yes, indeed," she said. "I walked just like any one else till three years ago, when I met with my accident."

"What sort of an accident was it?" Molly was so much interested that she quite forgot that some people might have considered her questions rather impertinent.

"I was run over, crossing Broadway one very slippery day. The ground was covered with ice, and I fell in the middle of the street. Before I could get on my feet again, a horse-car came around the corner, and the driver could not stop his horses in time. It really wasn't anybody's fault."

Molly rose. She was beginning to feel embarrassed again. There was something in the sight of the helpless little figure in the wheel-chair that made her feel all at once as if she wanted to cry.

"I'm afraid I must go," she said a trifle unsteadily. "I can't leave Maud any longer. I'm awfully glad I know you, and the others will be so interested when I tell them about you."

"And I am delighted to know you, too," her new acquaintance said, heartily. "I have been more interested in my little neighbors than you might suppose. You see, I can hear your voices through the wall, just as you hear my singing, and when one spends a good deal of time alone, one gets interested in all sorts of little things. I hope you

will come to see me again, and bring all your little sisters."

"We'd love to come," declared Molly. "Will you please tell me your name in case we should want to ask for you at the front door?"

"My name is Oliver, Mary Oliver, but everybody calls me Miss Polly, and I like it much better. My brother Tom always called me Polly. I am sorry you must go so soon, for it is a great treat to have a visitor, but I suppose you mustn't leave your little sister any longer. I hope you will find things in better order the next time you come. Maggie is really very good about keeping the room neat, but Sunday morning——" And Miss Polly glanced regretfully at the unmade bed and the tray of breakfast dishes.

"Good-bye," said Molly, holding out her hand.

Miss Polly shook the little hand—her own hand was not much bigger—and then she looked at her visitor rather anxiously.

"Aren't you afraid of taking cold without any wrap?" she questioned. "To be sure it is only next door."

"Oh, I don't have to go out in the street at all," said Molly, unthinkingly. "I came through the door in the wall."

"The door in the wall?" repeated Miss Polly, looking puzzled. "What door do you mean, dear?"

Molly blushed.

“I didn’t mean to tell,” she said, “because it’s a secret. It’s a door that was cut between the two houses when Grandpa’s brother lived here. Everybody thinks it’s locked, but it isn’t. It’s such fun coming that way—like doing a thing in a book, you know.”

Miss Polly laughed merrily.

“What a delightful way to come,” she said. “I won’t mention your secret to a soul, and you must often come to see me through the wall.” She looked so young and pretty, with her face all dancing with merriment, that Molly felt suddenly as if she were sharing a secret with a little girl of her own age.

“I’ll tell Dulcie and Daisy as soon as they come home from church,” she promised, “and I know they’ll want to come and see you right away.” And then she hurried off.

As she entered the nursery, a few minutes later, the strains of “Only an Armor-Bearer” could be distinctly heard through the wall, and Miss Polly’s piano was playing a lively accompaniment to the familiar tune.

CHAPTER V

MISS POLLY'S STORY

“**O**F course, if Grandma should ever ask us, we should have to tell her, but if she doesn't—and I don't really believe she will—I don't see why it's our duty to say anything about it.”

Dulcie spoke in a tone of settled conviction, the result of long considering on the subject, and her verdict was received by her three younger sisters with unmistakable satisfaction. For three days, “Molly's adventure,” as Daisy called it, had been the chief topic of conversation in the nursery. From the moment when, on their return from church on Sunday morning, Molly and Maud had poured the wonderful story into their incredulous ears, Dulcie and Daisy had thought of little else. Many and long had been the discussions, always held in low voices, and in the seclusion of their own room. At first Daisy had been of the opinion that Grandma must be told. “Suppose a burglar should make his way through the mysterious door some night,” she suggested, “and carry off the family silver!” But this objection to the keeping of their secret had been

overruled by Molly, who pointed out that the burglar would first be obliged to break into the house next door, and that it was most unlikely that he would discover the existence of the door in the wall. The people in the boarding-house were certainly not burglars, and as nobody had ever thought of opening the door before, why were they not as safe now as they had ever been? Still Daisy was not altogether convinced, and it was only after many hours of doubt and uncertainty that she finally yielded to the strong persuasions of her sisters.

"Just think, it's the first real secret we ever had," pleaded Molly.

"It was my secret first," chimed in Maud, "and I needn't have told any of you if I hadn't wanted to. If you tell, Daisy, I think you're the meanest girl in the world." And Maud—who was still feeling rather poorly—began to cry.

But at last even Daisy ceased to protest. One stipulation she made, however, and that was to be allowed to write the whole story to Papa.

"If Papa says we can keep the secret," she said, "it will be all right, but if he thinks Grandma ought to know, we shall have to tell her."

"It will take a long time to get an answer from China," said Dulcie, cheerfully, "and Papa always understands things."

So Daisy wrote her letter, and felt decidedly more comfortable after it was mailed. And now it was

Wednesday night, and the children were enjoying the rare treat of an evening to themselves. Grandma and Aunt Kate had gone to dine with their minister and his wife, and were to attend a missionary meeting afterwards, so as soon as they finished their rather meager supper, they had retired to their own premises, which was more agreeable than spending a silent evening down-stairs. For the past fifteen minutes, they had been eagerly discussing the propriety of making a call on their interesting next-door neighbor.

"You promised to take me just as soon as I was well enough," pleaded Maud, "and I'm all well now. Grandma says I may go out to-morrow if it doesn't rain. I think we ought to go and thank her for being so kind. She sang 'Only an Armor-Bearer' six times on Sunday, and she's sung all my favorite week-day songs, too."

"I think it's our duty to go," said Molly, virtuously. "Girls in books always go to see cripples and invalids. They read the Bible to them, and bring them nice things to eat. Perhaps we could 'minister' to her, like that girl in 'Ministering Children.'"

"We haven't any nice things to take her to eat," said Daisy, with a sigh. "We might read the Bible to her, though. Did she seem like a very religious lady, Molly?"

"I don't know," said Molly. "She didn't talk

about religious things, but I'm sure she's very good. She said she loved her books, so perhaps she'd rather read the Bible to herself."

"I think she must be like 'Cousin Helen' in 'What Katy Did,'" decided Dulcie. "You know she was always very cheerful, and everybody loved her. I don't remember that she was particularly religious. I feel perfectly sure Papa would like to have us go to see her."

"Of course he would," affirmed Molly, with conviction. "Grandma wouldn't, though, because she never wants us to go and see anybody. I think sometimes Grandma just tries to be disagreeable."

"I don't think we ought to say such things," said Daisy, gravely. "You know what Papa told us about being loyal."

"Well, we don't have to be loyal to Grandma when we're all by ourselves," retorted Molly. "It's hard enough to remember when we're with people, like Uncle Stephen and Miss Leslie. We can say what we like to each other, and it's a great comfort."

"Don't argue, children," reproved Dulcie, in her elder sister tone. "I've thought it over a lot, and I've decided that it really is our duty to go and call on the singing lady."

"Let's go now, right away," exclaimed Maud, joyfully, springing to her feet.

Dulcie glanced at the clock.

"It's only a little after seven," she said, reflect-

ively. "Mary's out, and Bridget never comes upstairs till bedtime. Yes, I think we might go now."

"Come along, then," cried Maud, already half-way to the door. She was promptly followed by Molly, and Daisy, though still a little reluctant, did not linger far behind. But Dulcie still hesitated.

"We ought to take her a present," she said. "People always take presents to cripples."

"What sort of a present?" Molly inquired anxiously.

"Flowers, or a Bible, or—or—oh, I don't know exactly; something very nice and appropriate."

The other three glanced helplessly around the room, and their faces fell.

"But we haven't any flowers," said Molly, "and I'm quite sure Miss Polly has a Bible. We couldn't give her ours, anyway, because it belonged to Mamma. I don't believe we really have to take a present, Dulcie. I think she'll be glad to see us, even if we haven't got anything for her."

"You don't suppose she'd care for a paper doll?" suggested Maud. "Of course I know she's a grown-up lady, but if she has to sit still in a chair all the time, she might enjoy cutting out paper dresses. I'd take her my prettiest one if you think she'd like it."

Dulcie and Molly laughed, and Daisy said kindly:

"I'm afraid a paper doll wouldn't do, Maudie,

though it was very sweet of you to think of it. We'll have to go without a present this time, but perhaps we can make her a book-mark, or something like that, before we go again."

That question being settled, there seemed nothing further to wait for, so, with fast-beating hearts, the four little girls set forth on their adventure. At the trunk-room door Maud drew back.

"I didn't know it was going to be so dark," she protested. "I don't like dark places."

"Nonsense," said Dulcie, impatiently. "Keep hold of Daisy's hand, and you won't be scared." And, as the eldest member of the party, Dulcie advanced firmly into the trunk-room.

It required some fumbling to discover the knob of the mysterious door, as the only light was the dim reflection from a single gas-jet in the hall, but when found it turned easily, and the next moment they had plunged into the still greater darkness of the housemaid's closet next door.

Molly tumbled over a step-ladder, and Maud uttered a suppressed scream, but Dulcie pressed on steadily ahead.

"This is the way out," she announced in an excited whisper; "I feel the door. Oh, I hope it isn't locked. No, it's all right; here's the handle. Oh!" And, with a great gasp, Dulcie stepped out into the lighted hall of the boarding-house.

"That's her room," whispered Molly, pointing

to one of the closed doors. "Shall I knock, or will you, Dulcie?"

"You'd better," said Dulcie. "You know her, and we don't. Be sure not to forget to introduce us."

Molly stepped forward, and for the second time, tapped softly at the "singing lady's" door. There was a moment's pause, and then the sweet voice they had all so often heard singing the old-fashioned ballads they loved, called a cheerful "Come in," and Molly turned the handle.

Miss Polly was in her wheel-chair, which had been pushed under the rather high chandelier in the centre of the room. She had evidently been reading, but at the children's entrance she laid down her book, and with a little cry of pleasure, held out both hands in greeting.

"Why, it's my little neighbors from next door," she said joyfully. "Oh, but I am glad to see you, dears. And did you all come through the door in the wall?"

"Yes, we did," said Molly; and, mindful of Dulcie's instruction, she added, primly, "These are my three sisters; Dulcie, Daisy, and Maud. We came to thank you for being so kind about singing while Maud was in bed, with her sore throat."

"You are all most welcome, I am sure," said Miss Polly, heartily, her pretty face fairly beaming with pleasure. "It's never any trouble to me to sing. I

love music more than almost anything else in the world. I would like to be at my piano all day if it were not for fear of troubling the other boarders."

"I'm sure it couldn't trouble anybody," said Dulcie, politely. "We love it."

"You are very kind to say so, dear, but you see people don't all feel the same way about things. There was an old gentleman on this floor last year who objected very much. He said music made him nervous, and threatened to leave if he ever heard the piano when he was in his room. Miss Collins was very sorry, but of course she couldn't run the risk of losing a boarder, so I had to be very careful. Fortunately, he has gone away now, and the young man who occupies the room this winter is scarcely ever at home. Now, won't you all sit down and make me a nice little visit? I expected to be alone all the evening, for Miss Collins told me she was going to the theatre, and she is about my only visitor. I am sorry I haven't more chairs to offer you. You see, I have so few visitors, it seemed foolish to waste chairs, so I let Miss Collins take some that belonged in this room and use them somewhere else. Perhaps two of you won't object to sitting on the bed."

"We like sitting on beds very much," remarked Maud, as she and Molly had promptly seated themselves. "Your bed is made up now, isn't it? Molly said it wasn't the other day."

"Maud!" cried Molly, blushing, but Miss Polly only smiled.

"That was because the chambermaid had gone to church," she explained. "Maggie is a nice girl, and does many kind things for me every day, but she is very busy, and sometimes I have to wait a little while, which is only right and natural."

"You must excuse Maud," apologized Dulcie. "She doesn't mean to be rude, but she isn't eight yet. I think this is a very pretty room. May I look at your books? I love books."

"To be sure you may, and borrow any that you like. I am afraid a good many of my books are rather dry for a little girl, but I have 'The Wide Wide World,' and 'The Lamplighter,' and Grace Aguilar's works. You might enjoy some of those."

Dulcie went over to the bookcase, and was soon absorbed in examining its contents, but the other three remained in their seats, and prepared to make themselves agreeable.

"It's been a very pleasant day," observed Dulcie, by way of starting the conversation. "We've been playing in the square. We often go there to play."

"It must be a very pleasant place to play in," said Miss Polly. "I sometimes wish this house was opposite the park, for it would be so pleasant to see the green trees in summer. But one cannot have everything, and I am so comfortable here, in this

nice room, that it doesn't seem quite right to wish for anything more."

"Don't you ever go out at all?" asked Daisy, and she looked so distressed that Miss Polly hastened to say cheerfully:

"Well, no, dear. You see, it couldn't be managed very easily. It would be very difficult to get my chair down all these stairs, even if there were any one to carry me, which of course there isn't."

"I shouldn't think you could be very heavy," said Molly, with a critical glance at the tiny figure in the wheel-chair. "If somebody carried you downstairs, couldn't you go for a drive in a carriage? Central Park is lovely, and there are beautiful trees there. Lizzie, our nurse, used to take us to Central Park very often. We went on the Sixth Avenue elevated road, and it was great fun, but I don't suppose you could go that way."

Miss Polly smiled rather sadly.

"I am afraid not," she said. "A carriage would be different, but carriages cost money, you know."

"I wish we had a carriage," said Daisy, regretfully. "We'd take you out every day if we had. Papa had a horse and carriage when we lived in Danby, before Mamma died, but that was a long time ago. We don't mind not having one ourselves, because we like the stages and the elevated just as well, but it would be lovely to take you to Central Park."

"Thank you, dear, but I appreciate the kind thought just as much as I should the drive. There is just one reason why I should like to be able to get out occasionally; it would give me more to write about in my letters to Tom."

"Who is Tom?" inquired Daisy, with interest.

"My dear brother; the only near relative I have in the world. I write to him every week, and sometimes it is a little difficult to make my letters interesting. Tom isn't particularly fond of books, and I am afraid it might bore him to hear about what I am reading. Sometimes I am almost afraid he may begin to suspect that I don't get about as I used to."

"Why, doesn't he know?" gasped Daisy; and Dulcie, who had been glancing over "A Mother's Recompense," suddenly closed her book, and regarded Miss Polly with increased interest.

Miss Polly blushed, and looked a little embarrassed.

"No, dear, he doesn't," she confessed. "You see, I have never been able to bring myself to the point of telling him. You see, he was in Chicago when I met with my accident, and he had just written me of his engagement to such a dear girl. He was so happy, and if he had known about me, it would have spoiled everything. Tom is such a sweet, unselfish boy. Nothing in the world would have kept him away from me. He would have given up his position, where he was doing so well,

and come home to take care of me. I couldn't let him do that, now, could I? Of course, he had to be told of the accident, but I wouldn't let any one write him how serious it was, and when I left the hospital, and was able to write myself, he thought I was quite well again. I meant to tell him later, but somehow the right time never seemed to come. Tom and Helen are married now, and have a baby, a dear little girl, whom they have named for me. I was so happy when that news came that I cried—wasn't I silly?"

"But doesn't your brother ever come to see you?" Dulcie asked.

"He would if he could, dear, but he can't leave his business very well, and besides, it costs a good deal to come all the way from Chicago to New York and back. He sends me presents, though, such beautiful presents, and last summer, after the baby came, he and Helen wanted me to come and make them a long visit. He offered to pay all my expenses, and Helen wrote me such a cordial invitation. Of course, I couldn't go, and I had to pretend that I was too busy to leave New York. You see, Tom thinks I am still giving music lessons, as I did before my accident."

"But that isn't true," objected Daisy, looking rather shocked.

A shadow crossed Miss Polly's bright face.

"I know it, dear," she said, with a sigh, "and

that's the hardest part of it all. My father was a minister, and Tom and I were brought up always to speak the truth. It worries me a great deal to have to deceive Tom as I do, but even that seems better than being a burden to him, as I should be if he knew the truth. He had such a hard struggle at first, but he is doing splendidly now, and he and Helen are so ideally happy. They have just bought a little house on the Lake Shore, in one of the prettiest suburbs of Chicago. Tom sent me a photograph of it, with Helen and the baby on the porch. They say there's a dear little room for me, whenever I can spare the time to make them a visit. 'They little know what a troublesome visitor I should be.' Miss Polly's bright voice broke suddenly, and her sentence ended in a sigh.

"I don't believe you would be a troublesome visitor at all," said Daisy, laying a kind little hand on Miss Polly's knee. "I think they would just love having you; don't you, Dulcie?"

"Yes," agreed Dulcie, "I'm perfectly sure of it. But, Miss Polly, would you mind telling us what you write about every week, and how you keep your brother from finding out?"

Miss Polly smiled, but she looked a little troubled, too, and the color deepened in her cheeks.

"I'm afraid you will think me a very foolish person," she said, "but I'll tell you all about it from the beginning, and then perhaps you will understand

a little better. Tom and I were born in a Vermont village, where our father was minister of the Congregational Church for a good many years. My mother died when we were both little, and we were brought up by an old housekeeper, who was devoted to us. Tom is two years older than I, and ever since I can remember, I have loved him better than any one else in the world. My father was a good man, but rather stern and unapproachable, and not particularly fond of children. Tom was a bright boy, always full of fun and mischief, but he didn't care very much about study, and my father—who was a great student himself—was constantly reproaching him for not doing better at school. He wanted Tom to study for the ministry, but the boy had no taste for preaching. He went to college to please Father, but at the end of his sophomore year he had so many conditions to make up that Father was very angry, and refused to let him go back the next term, so Tom decided to go West and try to make his fortune. That was eight years ago, and he was just twenty then. He had rather a hard time at first, but after a year or two, he settled in Chicago, where he has lived ever since. He came home twice for a visit. The last time was three years and a half ago, when Father died. Father wasn't a rich man—country ministers never are rich men—but all he had was divided equally between Tom and me. Tom wouldn't take a penny. He

said he was quite able to support himself, and that I must have all Father's money. It was very generous of him, and I tried my best to make him take his share, but he is an obstinate boy, and when he has once made up his mind to do a thing, nothing in this world will change him. So in the end I had to give in, and he went back to Chicago. He wanted me to go with him, but I'd set my heart on coming to New York to study music and give lessons. Of course, I had to leave the parsonage, where Tom and I were born, and after spending the summer with some friends, I came here to New York in the fall and started work. It wasn't quite as easy as I had expected, but I managed to get a few pupils, and the money I earned paid for my own lessons. I was very happy all that winter, and then—and then I met with my accident."

Miss Polly paused for a moment, and the look in her eyes was very sad, but when she went on again, her voice was as cheerful as ever.

"Of course there was no more work for me after that, and if it hadn't been for the money Tom had made me accept, things would have been much harder than they were. I had been boarding up-town before the accident, but when I was in the hospital, I wrote to Miss Collins—who used to live at Pine Brook, and was a friend of my mother's—and asked if she could give me a room in her house. I thought it would be pleasanter than living with

complete strangers. She was very kind, and offered me this lovely room, which happened to be vacant just then, so as soon as I was able to leave the hospital, I was brought here, and here I have been ever since. I have never been down-stairs since the day I was carried up, but Miss Collins lets me have my dear piano, and that is my greatest joy."

"But you haven't told us about the letters to your brother," said Dulcie.

"I'm just coming to that, my dear. You see, when I first came to New York, I used to write Tom about my pupils, and he got to know their names, and would ask questions about them in his letters. Well, afterwards, I had to keep on writing about the same things, or he would have thought it strange. I have to use a good deal of imagination, because I have never seen any of those people since my accident."

"You mean you make up things," said Dulcie, "just as if you were writing a story."

Miss Polly nodded.

"That's just it," she said. "I used to write stories when I was a little girl, though, of course, none of them were worth anything. I have made up all sorts of stories about those old pupils of mine. I don't know what they would say if they ever heard of them, but they are all pleasant stories, so perhaps they wouldn't object very much. Sometimes I am able to write something that is really true. One of

the girls I taught was married this winter. I saw an account of the wedding in the paper, and I cut it out and sent it to Tom in a letter. I was afraid I had made a mistake, though, when Tom wrote that Helen wanted to know what I wore to the wedding. I had to invent a costume, and that wasn't easy, for I know very little about the fashions nowadays." And Miss Polly glanced down at her plain blue wrapper with a rather sad smile.

"I think you are the most wonderful person I ever heard of," declared Dulcie, with shining eyes.

"But just think how your brother will feel when he finds out," said Daisy; "he will find out sometime, won't he?"

"I am afraid he will, and that is what worries me. There is one comfort, though; it won't be quite as bad as it would have been at first, for Tom is doing better in business now, and the burden might not seem so very great."

"I don't believe he would think it a burden at all, and I think you ought to tell him, I really do," said Daisy, with unusual firmness.

Miss Polly shook her head.

"Not yet, dear," she said; "some day, perhaps, but not just yet."

For a moment nobody spoke, and then Maud's voice broke the silence. "Won't you please sing 'Darby and Joan'?" she inquired in a rather sleepy little voice. Maud was only seven, and she

had not found Miss Polly's reminiscences quite so absorbing as her elder sisters had done.

"To be sure I will," said Miss Polly, and in a moment she had pushed the wheel-chair across the room to the piano.

Then followed a very pleasant half-hour. Miss Polly sang all their favorite ballads, greatly to everybody's enjoyment, especially Maud's. The little girl quite forgot that she was sleepy, and stood by the piano, drinking in every note, and looking so happy that Miss Polly regarded her with growing interest.

"You love music, don't you, dear?" she asked, kindly, at the close of "Twickenham Ferry."

"Oh, yes," said Maud, eagerly; "I love it when I'm on the other side of the wall, but I love it even better when I'm on this side."

Everybody laughed, and then Daisy looked at the clock, and rose reluctantly.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she said, "but I'm afraid we ought to go. It's nearly half-past eight, and Grandma always sends us to bed at eight."

Miss Polly looked sorry, but made no objections.

"You must do as your grandmother wishes," she said, "but I hope you will be able to come again very soon."

"Oh, we will, we will," promised the four little girls, and then, to every one's surprise, Maud—who was not usually a demonstrative child—suddenly

lifted her face and kissed the little lady in the wheel-chair.

Miss Polly fairly beamed with pleasure, and yet there were tears in her eyes, too, as she returned Maud's kiss.

"You dear little girl!" she exclaimed, a trifle unsteadily. "Why, no one has kissed me since—oh, not in ever so long, and it's so very sweet to be loved."

"May we kiss you too?" inquired Dulcie, impulsively.

Miss Polly held out her arms.

"Indeed you may," she said, heartily. "You have given me a beautiful evening, and it will be quite an exciting story to write Tom next Sunday, how four dear little neighbors came to see me, through a mysterious door in a wall."

"I can't help whether Grandma would approve or not," said Dulcie, when they were back in the nursery. "I am sure Papa and Mamma would want us to go and see that poor dear little Miss Polly just as often as we could. And, after all, Papa is the person we have to mind."

"He'll know all about it when he gets my letter," said Daisy, in a tone of satisfaction. "I think we might write Uncle Stephen and Miss Leslie about it, too; I'm sure they would be interested, and they would never tell Grandma. I know Miss Polly must be a very lovely Christian, even if she doesn't

tell her brother every bit of the truth. Just think of having to stay in one room all the time, and never being able to get out of a wheel-chair. Nobody else could bear it as she does. I'm quite sure it's our duty to go and see her."

"I don't know which I like best, Miss Leslie or Miss Polly," remarked Molly, reflectively.

"I do," cried Maud; "I think Miss Polly is the loveliest lady in the world, and I'm going to 'minister' to her, the way you said. I don't know what 'ministering' means, but I'm going to find out, and then I'll do it just as hard as I can."

CHAPTER VI

PAUL

IT was Grandma who made the exciting announcement at the breakfast table, one morning about ten days later.

"Julia is coming to New York next week," she remarked to Aunt Kate, looking up from a letter she was reading, "and she wants to bring Paul with her."

"Oh, how exciting!" cried Molly, dropping her spoon into the oatmeal in the excitement of the moment. "You'll let them come, won't you, Grandma?"

Grandma frowned. One of her strictest rules was that children were not to talk at meal times.

"Certainly my daughter is always welcome to her mother's house," she said, coldly, and Molly, very much embarrassed, dropped her eyes to the tablecloth.

Julia was Grandma's married daughter, Mrs. Chester, who lived in Boston, and whose only child Paul had long been a subject of considerable interest to the four little girls. They had never seen Paul,

but according to his mother—who generally paid flying visits to her family in New York several times a year—he was a very remarkable little boy. Dulcie glanced at Aunt Kate, to see how she was taking the news, but her somewhat inexpressive face appeared quite unruffled.

“Paul hasn’t been very well, it seems,” Mrs. Winslow went on, “and the doctor advises change of air. Julia has taken him out of school for a month, and wants to bring him here.”

“I hope Julia isn’t as fussy over the boy as she used to be,” said Aunt Kate, buttering a slice of toast as she spoke. “He always seemed to me about as strong as any child of his age, and I know his father thinks he is. He told me the last time I was in Boston that Julia coddles Paul entirely too much.”

“Well, Paul is an only child,” said Grandma, with unusual indulgence for her. “Julia has never recovered from the death of the other baby.”

Aunt Kate took up the report of the Missionary Society, which had arrived in the morning’s mail, and nothing more was said on the subject of the expected guests just then, but as soon as the children were safely out of Grandma’s presence they began chattering all at once.

“Won’t it be fun to have a little boy come to stay with us?” cried Molly, before they were half-way up-stairs.

"I hope he will be a nice boy," said Dulcie, a little doubtfully. "I'm afraid he's pretty spoiled."

"Oh, it will be nice to have him even if he is spoiled," affirmed Daisy. "He must be an awfully clever boy, anyway. Aunt Julia says he speaks French and German, and he's read, I don't know how many books."

Molly sighed.

"I'm afraid he'll be terribly studious," she said, "and it won't do for us to say we don't like lessons, or he'll think us so stupid. Still, it's going to be very interesting, and I'm awfully glad he's coming."

"I'm afraid we won't be able to go and see Miss Polly while he's here," said Daisy, regretfully. "We can't tell our secret to any more people, you know."

This was certainly a drawback. Going to see Miss Polly had become one of their greatest pleasures. They had made several calls since that first evening, and were already growing very fond of the brave, unselfish little woman, who bore her troubles so uncomplainingly, and was always so bright and merry.

"Perhaps Paul will be such a nice boy that we shall be able to trust him," Molly suggested, but Dulcie and Daisy shook their heads.

For the next few days little was talked of by the children except the arrival of the expected visitors.

"It's almost like having a book person come to

stay with us," said Molly. "We've heard so much about Paul, but we didn't think we should ever really know him. Of course he'll like Dulcie, she's so clever, but I don't suppose he'll care very much about the rest of us."

"He ought to like Daisy," said Maud, "because they're both ten and a half. Don't people generally like each other when they're just the same age?"

"I don't know," said Molly, "but we'll find out pretty soon, and, oh, isn't it exciting?"

"A very learned boy is coming to stay with us," Molly—who was fond of using fine words—told Miss Hammond, the daily governess. "He speaks French and German, and learned the multiplication table all by himself when he was only five. He could read the Bible perfectly before he was seven."

Molly expected Miss Hammond to be much impressed, and was somewhat crestfallen when the only answer she received was the not very comforting remark that it was a pity some little girls didn't know their tables better.

It was Friday when Mrs. Chester's letter came, and on the following Wednesday the visitors arrived. The four children were watching from the parlor window, and as the cab drew up, there was a simultaneous rush for the front door. Grandma and Aunt Kate had gone to the station to meet the travellers, and as the party came up the steps, all eyes were fixed eagerly upon Paul. He was a tall,

pale boy, with a rather discontented expression, and a shock of reddish brown hair. He was not a handsome boy, which was something of a shock, as his mother's descriptions had led them to expect a sort of young Adonis, but he shook hands politely, and murmured a few rather unintelligible words, in answer to Dulcie's eager assurances of how delighted they all were to see him. Mrs. Chester, a pale, languid lady, who talked a great deal about her health, greeted the little girls kindly, and then they all went up-stairs together.

"May Paul come to the nursery with us?" Molly inquired, as they reached the guest-room door.

"Not now," Paul's mother answered. "He is tired from his journey, and must take a little rest before dinner."

"I don't want to rest; I'm not tired," protested Paul, in such a fretful tone that the children regarded him in astonishment. "I want to go with them."

"Oh, no, darling, you must lie down first for half an hour. You and the little girls can have a happy time together after dinner."

Paul looked anything but pleased, but was forced to submit, and the children saw the door of the guest-room resolutely closed against them.

"How funny to have to lie down in the daytime," said Maud, as they proceeded on their way up-stairs. "Is Paul sick?"

"I think he must be rather delicate," answered Daisy. "Perhaps he studies too much."

"But Dulcie studies a lot, too," persisted Maud, "and she never lies down in the daytime."

"I think Aunt Julia is a very fussy lady," said Molly. "Don't you remember how she always had to take medicine before her meals the last time she was here? She took afternoon naps, and we had to keep very quiet while she was asleep. Perhaps she's fussy about Paul, too."

Aunt Julia certainly was "fussy" about Paul, as the children very soon discovered. When Paul appeared at dinner, with a clean face, but otherwise unchanged, his mother told Grandma that she was obliged to be very particular about his diet.

"He will eat so few things," she said. "O dear! I have forgotten to bring down his tonic. Don't you want to run up-stairs for it, Paul darling? The bottle is on mother's bureau."

"No, I don't," replied Paul, with decision. "I hate that nasty stuff, and the doctor said I wouldn't need to take it any more when I had a change of air."

"Oh, my boy," remonstrated his mother, "the doctor didn't mean that you could leave it off at once. Now run and bring me the bottle, like a good child, and let these little girls see how obedient you are."

"I'll get it if Paul is tired," proposed Molly good-

naturedly, and somewhat to the children's surprise the offer was accepted.

Paul swallowed the medicine, over which he made a wry face, and dinner began.

"Take your soup, Paul dear," his mother admonished gently; "you are only playing with it."

"There's rice in it," objected Paul; "I hate rice." Grandma frowned.

"Little boys should learn to eat what is put before them, and not make remarks about their food," she said, reprovingly. If this remark had been addressed to Molly or Maud, she would have been reduced to instant submission. Not so Paul.

"I never eat things I don't like," he said, without the slightest sign of embarrassment. "A great many things disagree with me, don't they, Mother?"

"I am afraid they do," answered Mrs. Chester, with a sigh. "And that reminds me, Mother, he must have squeezed meat every day for his lunch, and I always let him have ice-cream at least three times a week. The doctor considers it good for him."

Maud's lips moved, and the other children were sure they could read the words "Goody, goody!" but the grown-ups noticed nothing, and if Grandma made no promises, she at least made no objections, which, as Molly said afterwards, was almost as good as saying yes. It was wonderful how much more

lenient Grandma was to Paul than she had ever been to the four little girls.

"Well, Paul, what have you been reading lately?" inquired Aunt Kate, when the soup question had been finally settled, by Mary's taking the plate away to the pantry, in order to remove the objectionable rice.

"Oh, I don't know," answered her nephew, rather sulkily; "nothing much, I guess."

"My darling Paul," cried his mother in horrified reproach, "what do you mean? Tell Aunt Kate at once about all the beautiful books you have read since you have been ill. He reads French just as well as English, you know, Kate. You must hear him to-morrow. What was that interesting story you were reading on the train to-day, Paul?"

"*Sans Famille*," said Paul, pronouncing the words with a decidedly English accent.

"Indeed?" said Aunt Kate. "Did you enjoy it?"

"I didn't pay much attention to it," returned Paul, unblushingly; "I hate French."

Aunt Kate smiled sarcastically, and even Grandma's stern face relaxed a little, but Paul's mother looked really pained.

"Don't notice him," she said apologetically. "Like all sensitive children, he objects to showing off. He really adores his French books."

Paul grew suddenly scarlet.

"I do not!" he proclaimed loudly. "I don't mind showing off, but I hate French books, and most English ones, too."

"That will do, Paul," said Grandma, who could not endure impertinence even from her only grandson. "Children who speak in that tone are sent away from the table."

Paul looked rather surprised, but wisely refrained from arguing the point, and the meal proceeded without any further unpleasantness. Paul refused to touch turnip, and informed his mother in a low voice that he hated baked custard, but if Grandma heard, she made no remark.

"May we take Paul up-stairs, Grandma?" Dulcie inquired, eagerly, as they rose from the table. "Perhaps he would like to play lotto."

"Yes, I suppose you may as well," answered Mrs. Winslow, who evidently had her doubts as to how Paul would endure the usual evening routine in the dining-room. "What time does he go to bed, Julia?"

"Eight o'clock precisely," her daughter answered, "but I think he had better go a little earlier to-night. He must be tired from the journey. Go up-stairs with the children, darling, and Mother will call you in half an hour."

"Now we've really got you to ourselves at last," said Dulcie, joyfully, as they all went up-stairs together. "We've been talking about your coming

ever since your mother's letter came last week. You see, we felt as if we knew you; we've heard so much about you."

Paul looked interested. "What sort of things have you heard about me?" he inquired.

"Oh, about how clever you are; how you learned to read the Bible when you were so little, and could say all your tables when you were five, and—oh, lots of interesting things."

Paul grinned.

"I'm not very clever," he admitted condescendingly. "Mother likes to tell people I am, but I'm not really. I read a good many books, but I'd much rather play with the boys in the streets, only Mother won't let me. She's afraid I'll catch some disease. I've had measles and mumps, and chickenpox, but I've got to have scarlet fever and diphtheria yet, and Mother's terribly afraid of those two. Is this your room, and do you all sleep here together?"

Dulcie admitted that they did, and Daisy added cheerfully, as she turned up the gas:

"It's a very big room, you see, and we love being all together."

Paul glanced about him rather critically.

"You haven't any pictures on the walls," he remarked. "My room at home is full of pictures. They're all copies of the old masters, and Mother makes me learn a lot of stuff about the fellows who painted them. I hate it."

"I should think it would be very interesting," said Dulcie. "I love to learn about people."

"You wouldn't if you lived with Mother. She's always making me learn things, and then she tells people, and I have to show off. I say, what's an 'incumbrance'?"

"I don't know," said Dulcie, looking puzzled. "What makes you ask?"

"Because you're all one, Mother said so. She was talking to Father last night, and she said you were all a terrible incumbrance to Grandma."

Dulcie reddened.

"I don't know what it means," she said, "but I'm sure it isn't anything nice, and I don't think you are very polite to repeat it. Don't you know it isn't honorable to repeat things you hear people say? Papa never allows us to do it, and he is a very honorable man."

Paul looked rather embarrassed.

"My father's a very honorable man, too," he announced, indignantly. "He says Mother will make a milksop of me. Do you know what a milksop is?"

"No, I don't," admitted Dulcie, "but I shouldn't like to be one."

"Well, I guess it's just as bad as being an incumbrance. Anyway, you can't help being that, and it isn't your fault. Father said, 'Poor little chicks, I'm sorry for them,' and he wouldn't have said

that if it had been your fault. You'd like my father."

"We do know him," said Daisy. "He came with Aunt Julia once, and he brought us some candy. We liked him ever so much, he was so kind."

"Come, let's play lotto," interrupted Maud, who did not find the conversation particularly interesting. "If we don't begin, Aunt Julia will call Paul before we can finish a game."

"What are you doing, Dulcie—why don't you come to bed?" inquired Daisy from her pillow, an hour later.

"I'll come in a minute," her sister answered, absently. "I'm just looking for something in the dictionary."

There was a short silence. Then Dulcie closed the dictionary with a bang, and in another moment the light was out, and she had crept into bed beside Daisy. The two younger children were already asleep.

"Was it that word Paul said, you were looking for in the dictionary?" Daisy whispered, as her sister nestled down beside her, and slipped an arm round her neck.

"Yes," said Dulcie, shortly.

"And did you find it, and was it something very horrid?"

"It was rather horrid, but not as bad as I was afraid it might be. It means about the same thing

as being a burden. Miss Polly was afraid of being a burden to her brother, you know, but it isn't anything we can help, so there isn't any use in talking about it. I hate to talk about disagreeable things just before I go to sleep. I'll tell you about that last Christmas in Danby, and how Mamma let me help dress the tree."

"All right," said Daisy, cheerfully. "Do you think we are going to like Paul?"

"I think so," said Dulcie. "I was afraid he was going to be terribly conceited and stuck-up, but he isn't really. He ought not to repeat things he hears his father and mother say, but perhaps nobody has ever told him not to. Anyhow, I'm glad he hates showing off."

CHAPTER VII

THE STOLEN CHILD

"IT'S stopped snowing, and Grandma says we may go out and play in the Square," announced Paul, appearing at the nursery door, one afternoon a few days later. "Daisy and Maud can't go out on account of their colds, but Dulcie and Molly can."

"All right; I'll come in a minute, just as soon as I finish my letter," said Dulcie. Molly—who was preparing her lessons for Miss Hammond—threw down her geography, and sprang to her feet.

"I love going out in the snow," she cried, joyfully, "only I wish we had a sled. The Van Arsdale girls, across the way, have one and I saw them hitching on behind a big sleigh, a little while ago, but Grandma says it isn't lady-like to hitch on to sleighs, and, anyway, we haven't got a sled."

"We have great times in the Public Gardens at home," said Paul. "Some boys I know built a snow fort last winter, and we used to have regular battles. Mother wasn't going to let me play with them at first; she's always so afraid I'll take cold, but Father made her, and it was great fun. Hurry

up with your old letter, Dulcie. I'm so afraid Mother may change her mind, and say I can't go out in the dampness. Are you writing to your father?"

"No, she isn't," said Daisy; "she's writing to Miss Leslie."

"Who's Miss Leslie?"

"A lovely young lady we know. She lives in California, and we only saw her once, but she asked us to write to her. She and Uncle Stephen took us to 'The Pirates of Penzance.'"

"Is her first name Florence?" Paul inquired.

"Why, yes it is. How did you know?"

"I heard Grandma and Aunt Kate talking about her, when I was doing my French in Mother's room, the other day."

"I didn't know they knew her," said Daisy, looking very much surprised. "What were they saying about her?"

"I don't remember, I wasn't paying much attention, but I think she's going to marry somebody. I was just beginning to listen when Grandma coughed, and they stopped talking."

By this time Dulcie had finished her letter, and all the children were looking much interested.

"It must be Uncle Stephen," said Dulcie. "Perhaps he told them that night before we came downstairs. Oh, I do hope it is Uncle Stephen. It would be so lovely to have Miss Leslie for an aunt."

"It wouldn't do us much good if they lived away off in California," said Daisy, "but then they might come home sometimes, and invite us for a visit."

"It's too bad you and Maud can't go out," remarked Paul, regarding Daisy sympathetically, as Dulcie and Molly went to the closet for their ulsters and rubber boots. "Don't you suppose Grandma would let you if you teased?"

"No indeed she wouldn't," laughed Daisy. "You don't know Grandma very well if you think that. But we don't mind staying in the house, do we, Maud?"

"Not a bit," said Maud, looking important and mysterious. "We're going to do something very interesting while you're out."

"What are you going to do?" inquired Paul, curiously.

"I can't tell; it's a secret. It was my secret first, but we all know it now."

"I think you might tell me," said Paul, beginning to look offended. "It isn't polite to have secrets from your company."

Maud looked troubled, but Daisy hastened to intervene.

"Girls have lots of secrets they don't tell boys," she said, pleasantly. "If you and some other boys had a secret, you wouldn't tell us, you know you wouldn't."

"Maybe I would, and maybe I wouldn't. The trouble about telling girls things is they never can keep them to themselves."

"How about boys keeping things to themselves?" asked Daisy, at which seemingly innocent question Paul grew suddenly red, and no more was said on the subject of secrets.

Mrs. Chester was waiting for them in the hall. She was looking rather worried.

"Now, Paul, darling," she began anxiously, as her small son came running down-stairs, followed by Dulcie and Molly, "you will promise Mother to be very careful about those dreadful crossings, won't you? Take good care of him, Dulcie, and don't let him attempt to cross while there is anything in sight."

"I'll take care of him," promised Dulcie, rather proud of the charge, and just then Grandma's stern voice was heard from the head of the stairs.

"Don't be silly, Julia. Those children are quite capable of taking care of themselves. They are none of them babies. One would think to hear you talk that you considered that boy of yours either an infant or an idiot."

"Grandma is rather a sensible old lady, even if she does scold," remarked Paul, as they ran down the steps. "Mother wouldn't have let me go out at all if it hadn't been for her."

"Grandma doesn't believe in people making a

fuss about things," was Dulcie's rather guarded reply, and Molly added, doubtfully:

"I think she's a little kinder to you than she is to us, but then you are her truly grandchild, and we're only steps."

Fifth Avenue was a pretty sight that frosty afternoon. Children who live in New York in the twentieth century know little of the pleasures of winter, but in 1880 life was quite different. There were no "snow wagons" in those days, and the snow lay where it fell until a thaw came and melted it. Small boys and girls earned pennies by sweeping the crossings, and after a snowstorm every one who could manage to secure a sleigh did so, and the consequence was that Fifth Avenue, from Washington Square to Central Park, was lined with sleighs of every description, from the small one-horse cutter to the big stage sleigh, drawn by four horses. On this February afternoon the scene was a particularly gay one. The sun had come out, and the trees in the Square were all glittering with snow, while the constant tinkle of sleigh-bells filled the frosty air.

"I wish we could have an adventure," said Molly, as they paused at the corner, waiting for an opportunity to cross. "I don't feel a bit like just staying in the Square, and watching other people having fun with their sleds. Oh, look, Dulcie; there's the stolen child. She's sweeping the crossing."

"What stolen child?" demanded Paul, eagerly.

“That ragged little girl with the broom,” said Molly. “Generally she has a basket, and goes to the basement doors to ask for things to eat.”

“How do you know she’s been stolen? Did she tell you so?”

“No, we’ve never spoken to her, but we think she must have been. She’s got blue eyes and golden hair, just like all the stolen children in books, and once we saw her crying. It was when the Van Arsdales’ cook slammed the basement gate in her face. We were dreadfully sorry, but we couldn’t do anything about it. Grandma never lets Bridget give anything to beggars. Dulcie has made up some wonderful stories about the stolen child.”

“I don’t see how you can be sure she’s been stolen,” said Paul, sceptically. “Any girl might cry if she was hungry and a cook slammed a gate in her face. I don’t see why you don’t speak to her and find out.”

“We never had a chance to speak to her,” said Dulcie. “We’ve only seen her from the window.”

“You can speak to her now,” said Paul, who was fond of getting to the bottom of things. “She’s right here, and we’re right here, too. If she really has been stolen, and we can find her family, we may get a big reward. You know they offered a tremendous reward for Charlie Ross. This one’s only a girl, so perhaps they wouldn’t pay as much for her, but families are always awfully glad to get back a

stolen child. I've just been reading about one in a French book, and the father built a hospital, to show his gratitude. Come on, let's speak to the little girl right away."

Dulcie's heart beat rather fast, and Molly was conscious of a little thrill of excitement, as they approached the small crossing-sweeper.

"She's rather dirty," whispered Molly. "I thought stolen children were always very clean."

"Not always," Dulcie reassured her. "They can't help being dirty sometimes, when there isn't any place to wash. She'd be very pretty if her face was clean, and her hair wasn't so tangled."

As the three children paused at the crossing, "the stolen child" looked up and held out a small dirty hand.

"Gimme a penny," she began, in the whining tone of the professional beggar.

"I'm sorry," said Dulcie, kindly, "we'd like to give you some money, but we haven't any with us. Would you mind telling us your name?"

"Rosy Finnegan," answered the crossing-sweeper, promptly. Dulcie was deeply impressed.

"Rosy is a beautiful name," she said, "but Finnegan—are you sure your name really is Finnegan?"

"The stolen child" nodded.

"Me name's Finnegan," she said, decidedly. "Say, ain't none of yous got a penny?"

"I'm afraid we haven't," Dulcie admitted re-

luctantly, "but we'd like to have a little talk with you. Couldn't you stop sweeping for a little while? We'd like to have you come into the park with us."

Rosy Finnegan looked very much surprised. Little girls who lived on Washington Square were not in the habit of addressing her in such a friendly manner. But she was of a sociable disposition, and quite ready for an adventure of any kind. So, gathering her broom under her arm, she prepared to follow her new acquaintances.

"Now we can talk better," said Dulcie, when they had reached the comparative quiet of the little park. "I'm afraid it's too cold to sit down, so we'll have to keep walking while we talk. My name is Dulcie Winslow, and this is my sister Molly. This boy is Paul Chester, and he's a sort of cousin of ours. My sister and I have been interested in you all winter, and we want to ask you some questions. You say your first name is Rosy. That's short for Rose, of course. I don't believe many beg—I mean many little girls like you, are named Rose. It's quite a book name."

"Is it?" said Rosy, looking interested. "I didn't never read no books. Me name's Rosy Finnegan."

"You think it's Finnegan," said Dulcie, gently, "but perhaps it's something else. Do you remember your mother?"

"Sure," responded Rosy Finnegan, stopping short in her astonishment; "me mother's home."

Dulcie was conscious of a sensation of disappointment at this reply, but Paul was not so easily daunted.

"Does she beat you?" he inquired, abruptly.

Rosy grinned.

"I guess she do, sometimes," she admitted. Dulcie felt her spirits rising again.

"I hope she isn't very cruel," she said, sympathetically. "Perhaps she isn't really your own mother."

"She's me mother all right," persisted Rosy. "What makes you say she ain't?"

"Why—why," faltered Dulcie, finding some difficulty in explaining, "we don't know, of course, but we think perhaps you may have been stolen."

"The stolen child's" dirty little face grew suddenly very red.

"I ain't stole nothin'," she declared, indignantly. "How dare you say I stole!"

"Oh, we didn't, we didn't!" protested Dulcie and Molly both together. "We never thought of such a thing, did we, Paul?"

"Of course not," said Paul; "she doesn't understand. We don't think you stole, Rosy, we think perhaps somebody stole you. People do get stolen sometimes, at least they do in books, and there was Charlie Ross."

"Yes, that's it," chimed in Dulcie. "In books the stolen children almost always have blue eyes and golden hair, just like yours. That's why we thought you might be one, and we wanted to talk to you about it. Do you mind if we ask you some questions?"

"I don't mind," said Rosy, who was beginning to look very much puzzled, "but I ain't never stole nothin', I can tell you that. A girl on our block she got took up by the cops for stealin' apples out of a cart, but I ain't never stole a thing, honest I ain't."

"We're quite sure you never did," soothed Dulcie. "Stolen children are always very good. Do you remember anything that happened when you were very little, almost a baby, you know?"

"Oh, I can tell you about that," said Rosy, her face brightening. "We lived on Rivington Street, and Dad sold shoe-strings, and Jim and me sold matches. Jim he sells matches yet, but I don't. Ma takes the baby round when she begs. Is that all ye wants to know, 'cause I ought to be gettin' back to me crossin'?"

"We'd like to find out a little more, if you don't mind," said Dulcie. "You see, you may have been stolen before you were old enough to remember, or perhaps you were very ill, and lost your memory, like Marjorie in 'Marjorie's Quest.' Were you ever very ill?"

"I got run over onect," replied Rosy, not with-

out a touch of pride in the recollection. "I was took to the 'orspittle. It was nice in the 'orspittle; I liked it."

"I know," said Dulcie, comprehendingly. "Did kind ladies bend over you, and speak very gently, and give you nice things to eat?"

"Sure; them was the nusses. One of 'em was awful pretty. Jim said he'd like to get run over, too, so he could go to the 'orspittle. He did try onect, but the cop catched him, and told him if he ever done it again, he'd get took up."

"How old are you?" demanded Paul, who had no intention of leaving all the glory of finding a stolen child to Dulcie.

"I dunno jist. Maybe I'm eight, and maybe I'm nine. Ma says she disremembers."

"That settles it," cried Paul, triumphantly. "Of course she's been stolen. People always know how old they are, unless there's something queer about them."

Dulcie's face brightened. To tell the truth, she had been growing a little sceptical as to whether there was, after all, anything particularly "queer" about Rosy Finnegan. Paul's conviction revived her hopes.

"I guess she must be stolen," she said, "if her mother doesn't know how old she is. Rosy, would you like to find your real family, and go to live in a beautiful home, where you would have lovely

clothes to wear, and everybody would love you very much?"

"Sure I would; I'd like it first rate. When can I go?"

"Oh, not till you can remember your past. Try to think very hard, and perhaps your memory will begin to come back. Don't you remember any little prayer or hymn, or—or anything like that? Stolen children in books generally do."

"They sings hymns at the mission," said Rosy. "I went to the mission onect, but they said I couldn't come again if I didn't wash, so I didn't go no more."

"But—but don't you like to be clean?" gasped Dulcie. In her experience, stolen children always longed for cleanliness, as well as other blessings of life.

"I hate washin'," returned Rosy, with so much sincerity in her tone that it was impossible to doubt her.

"She's probably forgotten about taking baths," whispered Paul. "She'll be all right when she's found."

"I don't see how she's ever going to be found," said Dulcie, with a sigh, "if she can't remember the least little thing. I'm afraid we'll have to give it up."

"Oh, I say, that's an awful shame!" cried Paul. "Maybe she'll begin to remember in a few minutes."

"Maybe I will," said Rosy, hopefully. "I want to go to that nice place, anyhow. Let's come right along. It's cold walkin' so slow."

Dulcie clasped her hands in dismay.

"I don't know what to do," she said, tragically. "We've raised her hopes, and we'll have to disappoint her. Oh, I wish we hadn't spoken to her at all."

"I'll tell you what we might do," exclaimed Molly, with a sudden inspiration. "Get her to take us home with her, and talk to the person she thinks is her mother. Maybe she'll confess."

"Oh, Molly, we couldn't. What would Grandma and Aunt Julia say?"

"I don't see that it matters what they say, if we are going to help a stolen child find her family," said Paul. "They'll be proud of us afterwards, especially if we get a big reward. Why, we might even be talked about in the newspaper."

But Dulcie was still doubtful.

"I'm sure Grandma would be very angry," she protested, "and Aunt Julia, too. Besides, we don't know for sure that she ever was stolen. She says she wasn't."

"I guess I made a mistake," put in Rosy, eagerly. "I disremembered first, but now I come to think about it, I'm pretty sure I was stole. Anyhow, I want the nice clothes. I'll show you the way to our tiniment. 'Tain't far."

"Where is it?" inquired Dulcie, still far from convinced of the wisdom of the proceeding.

"Over on Avenue A."

"Avenue A," repeated Dulcie, with a shiver. "Oh, we've never been there in our lives. We can't go with her, Paul, we really can't."

"All right, you needn't. I'm going, anyhow, and so's Molly. We like to see new places, don't we, Molly?"

"I won't go anywhere without Dulcie," said Molly, loyally. "I think we ought to go, though, Dulcie. She says she really was stolen, and it must be our duty to help her find her own mother, even if Grandma and Aunt Julia are angry. I'm sure Papa would want us to do our duty."

Dulcie wavered, and Rosy, quick to seize her advantage, began to cry.

"I want to find me family, I want to find me family, I do, I do!" she wailed, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles. "I want to have pretty clothes, and ice-cream, like in the 'orspittle."

This was too much for Dulcie's kind heart.

"Very well," she said desperately, "if you both think it's our duty, I suppose we shall have to go. Are you sure your mother is at home, Rosy?"

Rosy nodded. She had stopped crying as suddenly as she began, and was evidently quite as much interested in the adventure as either Molly or Paul.

“Show us the way,” commanded Paul, and three minutes later, they had left the safe precincts of Washington Square, and turned their faces resolutely in the direction of the East River.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOUSE ON AVENUE A

THEY were obliged to walk fast, in order to keep pace with "the stolen child," who trotted on ahead, her little yellow head bobbing up and down in her excitement. For the first few blocks, all went well, but as the neighborhood grew more squalid, the streets dirtier and more crowded, their hearts began to fail.

"I didn't know there were such dirty streets in New York," whispered Dulcie. "Don't you really think we'd better turn back?"

But, though anything but comfortable himself, Paul shook his head resolutely.

"If it's our duty, we ought to go on," he said. "I guess it's always like this where beggars live. It's a real adventure, and I never had one before. I'm going on, even if you don't. Oh, I say, this is a pretty awful place. Do you suppose it's Avenue A?"

Involuntarily they all paused on the corner, and at the same moment Rosy turned her head and asked a question.

"Can I take Jim along with me?" she demanded, anxiously.

"Along where?" inquired Dulcie.

"To that nice place you said I was goin' to. I'd like to take him; he's me brother."

"I don't know; perhaps you can," Dulcie said, doubtfully. "Isn't it sweet of her to want to take her little brother?" she added in a whisper. "Stolen children always want to do something like that. Their families are so happy to get them back they generally let them have anything they want. Perhaps they'll let Jim come, and adopt him, and send him to college, and when they grow up, he and Rosy will marry each other. It often happens that way."

"It's terribly interesting," said Molly, "but I wish Avenue A wasn't quite so dirty."

"Is it much farther, Rosy?" Dulcie questioned, anxiously.

Rosy shook her head, and pointed to a particularly disreputable-looking building, on the opposite side of the way.

"It's there," she announced; "down in the basement."

The street was piled with snow and refuse, and the children were obliged to pick their way, but they all had rubber boots, and the crossing was effected without much difficulty. Before the objectionable-looking tenement Rosy came to a halt.

"It's down them steps," she announced.

"Oh, I don't want to go down there, I really don't," cried Molly, shrinking back in sudden alarm.

Dulcie had grown pale, but her face was stern and set.

"We've got to go now we're here," she said, firmly. "I don't like it, but Paul thinks it's our duty. Think of poor little Rosy having to live here all the time. If we can help her to find her real family, nothing else will matter."

But despite her brave words, Dulcie's heart was beating very fast, as she followed "the stolen child" down the slippery flight of steps. Molly was trembling violently, and even Paul had turned a little pale. At the foot of the steps Rosy opened a door, and stood aside to let her companions enter.

Dulcie and Molly are middle-aged women now, with boys and girls of their own, but neither of them has ever forgotten her first impression of that tenement house basement. It really seemed incredible that such a quantity of dirt could have accumulated in so small a space. The floor was dirty, the walls were dirty, and the few articles of furniture the room contained were covered with dust. In the middle of the floor an extremely untidy baby was sprawling, playing with a half-starved kitten. On a tumbled-down bed in one corner a man lay, apparently asleep. There was a small fire in the stove,

on which a pot was simmering, and a woman in a soiled calico wrapper had just stooped to add some ingredient to the steaming contents.

At the opening of the door the woman turned her head, and at sight of the unexpected visitors she started back, with an exclamation of astonishment, and stood staring at the children, with eyes and mouth wide open. At the same moment the man on the bed opened his eyes.

"Shut that door," he commanded in a very hoarse voice, and the words were followed by a severe fit of coughing.

"Come in," said Rosy. "Dad's got an awful cold. He don't like air."

The children could not help thinking that a little fresh air would have improved the atmosphere, but they dared not say so, and in another moment they found themselves inside, with the door closed behind them.

There was a moment of dead silence; then the woman seemed to find her voice.

"What do yous want?" she inquired in a tone that was anything but hospitable.

"We want," began Dulcie, with a mighty effort to control her shaking voice, "that is, we came with Rosy. We thought perhaps you wouldn't mind telling us some things about her. There seems to be so much she can't remember."

"What's Rosy been up to?" inquired Mrs. Finne-

gan, fixing a stern eye upon her small daughter.

"She ain't took nothin' from yous, has she?"

"Oh, no indeed," cried Dulcie, indignantly.

"I'm sure she's a very good little girl, but you see, we've been interested in her for a long time, on account of her blue eyes and golden hair, and this afternoon we spoke to her. She told us about being in the hospital, and about your not knowing just how old she is, and that made us pretty sure she must have been stolen when she was a baby, and ——"

"Shtolen, is it?" screamed Rosy's mother, her eyes beginning to flash ominously, "and who shtole her, I'd like to be askin'?"

"I don't know—oh, please don't be angry," pleaded Dulcie, involuntarily moving a step nearer to the closed door. "We didn't mean you did it, only—only we thought you might know something about it, and be able to give us a clue. We want to find her real mother, you know."

"What are ye talkin' about, anyway?" demanded Mrs. Finnegan, whose temper was evidently not of the sweetest. "I never heard such crazy talk in me loife. Nobody shtole my Rosy. I guess it's shtealin' you've been yourselves, to get them good clothes you've got on. I'll be callin' the cop to yous, that's what I'll be doin', if yous don't get out of here moighty quick."

This was too much for Molly, and with a shriek

of terror she made for the door. Even Dulcie quailed before this awful threat, but not so Paul. His usually pale face had grown suddenly crimson, and before any one realized his intention, he had placed himself firmly in front of the angry Mrs. Finnegan.

"You mustn't talk in that way," he said, and his voice was very loud and clear. "It's very rude to insult people in your own house. We're not the kind of people who steal. We live on Washington Square, and we only came here because we wanted to find out about Rosy. We don't know that she was stolen, but we thought she might have been, and she wanted us to come, didn't you, Rosy?"

Thus appealed to, Rosy, who had been watching proceedings with deep interest, opened her lips for the first time since reaching home.

"They said they'd take me to a nice place, where I'd have lovely clothes, and ice-cream," she explained. "They said I was stole when I was a baby, and you wasn't my real mother. Say, Ma, can I go wid 'em, and Jim too?"

"You cannot," said Mrs. Finnegan, and there was unmistakable finality in her tone. "You was not shtole when you was a baby, and what's more, if you ever bring the likes of them in here again, I'll wallop you. Now get out, every one of yous, before I take a shtick to yous. But let me tell you

one thing first. My Rosy ain't shtole, and never was. We're honest people, we are, and me poor husband in his bed since Christmas, wid a cough on him that's enough to wake the dead. I'll tell you ——"

Mrs. Finnegan paused abruptly, as the door opened, and a boy of eleven or twelve appeared on the threshold.

"Hello!" exclaimed the newcomer, staring at the trembling visitors in astonishment; "what's the row?"

"Row," repeated the woman, "I guess it is a row. What do you think, Jim? Them young ones come in here as bold as brass, tellin' me to me face our Rosy was shtole when she was a baby. Did ye ever hear the like of that?"

"We didn't say she stole her," put in Paul. "We only said we thought she might have been stolen. She said herself perhaps she was."

"I did not!" shrieked Rosy, in sudden terror, as her mother made a step in her direction. "It's lies he's tellin', Ma."

"Of course it's lies. Now get along wid yous, and if I ever see one of yous hangin' round here, you'll get somethin' you won't like. Put 'em out, Jim."

Jim advanced threateningly.

"Come on," he ordered. "Out you goes."

The two little girls, now thoroughly frightened,

made a hasty retreat towards the door, but Paul did not move.

"Come, Paul," implored Dulcie, her teeth chattering with fright. "We don't want to stay here any longer. She isn't a stolen child, after all. Oh, please do come."

"I won't come till she apologizes for being so rude," returned Paul, obstinately.

At that moment the man on the bed moved and raised his head.

"Chase 'em, Jim," he commanded in his deep, hoarse voice; "I can't stand no more talk. The wind from that door's enough to give abody a chill. Chase 'em out, I say, and shut the door."

"Come along, young one," said Jim, and seizing Paul by the shoulders, he gave him a push, which sent that indignant small boy flying out into the street. As for Dulcie and Molly, they were already flying up the steps.

"Let's run, oh, let's run," gasped Molly. "Come, Dulcie, come, Paul. Oh, do be quick." And away flew the terrified child, closely followed by her sister.

But at the next corner Dulcie's sense of duty suddenly asserted itself.

"We've got to stop and wait for Paul," she panted. "Aunt Julia would be so angry if we left him behind."

Molly paused reluctantly, and they both looked

around. The next instant they had each uttered a shriek of horror, and were running back in the direction from whence they had come. It was a truly awful sight which met their gaze, for, rolling on a pile of snow, were two small figures, kicking and pummelling each other in a manner which filled Dulcie and Molly with unspeakable terror, for one of the figures was Jim Finnegan, and the other was Paul.

"He's killing Paul, oh, he's killing him!" wailed Molly, wringing her hands. "Somebody stop him; oh, please do stop him!"

But nobody did stop him, although quite a crowd of ragged children had gathered to watch the fight. Possibly street fights were of too common occurrence in that neighborhood to cause any great excitement. At any rate, nobody stirred, and an agonized glance up and down the street convinced Dulcie that there was not a policeman in sight. It was quite evident that Paul was getting the worst of the battle. Jim was at least a year older, and fully half a head taller, and, moreover, he was accustomed to fighting. Paul had never fought with any one before in his life, and had always been considered a delicate boy. For one moment only did Dulcie hesitate.

"I'll help you, Paul," she shouted, and the terrified Molly beheld her elder sister suddenly plunge forward into the snow-drift. In another moment

there were three figures struggling together, instead of two.

A shout went up from the bystanders.

"Good for the kid. I say, she's a plucky one. She's got the big fellow down. Oh, my eye! she's sittin' on his head."

"Run, Paul, run," gasped Dulcie, "quick, before he gets up again."

But Paul had no intention of running. His blood was up.

"I won't run," he protested loudly. "I won't be pitched out of a house like that. He's got to apologize."

"Oh, come off your high horse," advised Jim, who was, after all, a good-natured boy, and having succeeded, not without difficulty, in removing the weight on his head, and sending Dulcie rolling over in the snow, he rose to his feet, grinning. "Get along home, where you belong, and don't try to fight a feller twice your size."

"You've got to apol ——" began Paul, but he got no further, for Dulcie had already scrambled to her feet, and seized him firmly by the arm.

"That's all right, Paul," she panted. "You've hurt him dreadfully already. See how his nose is bleeding."

"So's mine," said Paul, putting his hand up to his face. "Oh, I say, isn't it awful?" And suddenly the brave hero began to cry.



"SHE'S GOT THE BIG FELLOW DOWN."—Page 128.

Five minutes later three very subdued, conscience-smitten children had left Avenue A behind them and were slowly making their way back in the direction of Washington Square. Two of the three were looking decidedly the worse for wear. Dulcie's hair-ribbon was gone, and her hat had lost all semblance of shape, and Paul's face was covered with blood, which still continued to pour from his nose, and one of his eyes was almost closed.

"Are you suffering very much, Paul?" Molly inquired anxiously.

"My head aches, and I feel sort of queer all over," answered Paul, "but I'm not sorry I did it. I'd do it right over again if I had to."

"Oh, what will your mother do when she sees you?" moaned Dulcie, "and I promised to look after you, too. My goodness! won't we be punished?"

"I'll never, never try to help a stolen child find her family again, not as long as I live," declared Molly. "We were only trying to be kind, and do our duty, and just see what happened."

"Maybe it would have been different if she'd really been stolen," said Dulcie. "I began to be afraid she wasn't the minute she said that about not liking to be clean. We oughtn't to have gone home with her, and it was mostly my fault, because I'm the oldest, but it was so exciting, and I really

thought we might be able to help her. Take my handkerchief, Paul, yours is soaking."

"I say," observed Paul, accepting the proffered handkerchief, "couldn't we go in the basement way? I don't want Mother to see me looking like this."

"We might," Dulcie admitted. "Bridget's pretty good-natured, but there's your eye. Your mother will have to see that. And there's my hat, too. Grandma will make an awful fuss about it. I really think the best way will be to go right up-stairs and tell the whole truth. Papa says it's always best to tell the truth and take the consequences."

Paul made no further suggestions, although the face behind Dulcie's handkerchief was very grave and troubled. He was a tender-hearted boy, and really loved his mother dearly. The thought of the horror and distress he was about to cause her was anything but pleasant. As they neared home, they were uncomfortably aware of the fact that people were casting surprised or amused glances at them, but fortunately they did not meet any one they knew. At the foot of Mrs. Winslow's front steps they all paused.

"You go in first, Molly," said Dulcie. "You're the only one who looks all right. Tell Mary not to scream when she sees Paul. It might frighten Aunt Julia, and I think we'd better break it to her gently."

Accordingly, Molly mounted the steps and rang the bell, while the other two lingered behind on the

sidewalk. There was a moment of anxious waiting, and then the front door opened, and on the threshold stood—not Mary but Grandma herself. Molly gave a great gasp, and sank against the wall.

"Where—where is Mary?" she faltered, with shaking lips.

"Gone to the dentist's. Where are the others?"

Molly did not answer; words were beyond her at that awful moment, but Mrs. Winslow did not have to repeat her question, for two forlorn, bedraggled little figures were already half-way up the steps. At the sight of them, Grandma started back, with a cry of horrified astonishment.

"You have all behaved simply outrageously." That was Mrs. Winslow's verdict, when she had heard the story, which Dulcie, as the eldest of the party, poured forth without concealment, and with a strong desire to assume the greater part of responsibility for the escapade. "You shall all be severely punished. Dulcie and Molly, go up to your room, and stay there till I can come to you. Come with me, Paul, and get your face washed. Your mother would faint on the spot if she saw you in this condition. If I had my way, I would give you each a good whipping, but I believe corporal punishment is not allowed by your much too-indulgent parents." And with a look which expressed unutterable things, Grandma swept Paul away to the pantry, and the two little girls went slowly up-stairs to the nursery.

"Well, did you have a good time in the Square?" inquired Daisy, looking up from her book at her sisters' entrance. "We didn't go to see Miss Polly, after all. We listened through the wall, and heard people talking, so we knew she must have company. Good gracious! Dulcie, what's the matter with your hat?"

Dulcie collapsed into a chair, and burst into tears.

"It's all 'the stolen child's' fault," explained Molly. "She wasn't stolen, after all, and her mother was a dreadful person, who was very rude to us, and her brother and Paul got into a fight, and ——"

"Oh, Molly, how awful!" gasped Daisy. "You don't mean Paul really fought?"

"Yes, he did, and Dulcie fought too, and sat on that horrid boy's head, and made him stop hurting Paul, and Grandma says we've got to be punished."

CHAPTER IX

MISS POLLY'S PIANO

"IT'S very humiliating to be in disgrace, and not allowed to have dinner with your family," said Molly, with a long sigh. "I hate bread and milk, don't you, Dulcie?"

Dulcie did not answer, but pushed away her almost untouched bowl, and rested her elbows on the nursery table. Her face was red and swollen with crying, and she looked the picture of woe. Molly regarded her critically.

"You haven't eaten anything," she said. "Aren't you afraid you'll be hungry before tomorrow morning?"

Dulcie shook her head.

"I don't care if I am," she said, drearily. "I can't swallow; every time I try something chokes me."

"Is your throat sore?" Molly inquired, with a vivid recollection of Maud's frequent sore throats.

"No, it isn't sore, but there's a lump in it. Oh, Molly, it's awful! I was never so unhappy before in my life."

Molly looked very much troubled.

"Is it because Grandma wouldn't let us go down

to dinner, and says we're not to have any dessert for a week?" she questioned doubtfully.

"Oh, I don't mind that so much. It's horrid, of course, but I could bear it if it wasn't for other things. Grandma says I'm a disgrace to the family, and she's going to write Papa about it."

"Papa won't believe her, I know he won't," protested Molly. "Besides, we can write to him too, and tell what really happened. I think you were very brave to fight that boy when he was hurting Paul."

"It was a terribly unladylike thing to do," said Dulcie. "I don't wonder Grandma was ashamed. Young ladies don't fight street boys, and I'm nearly twelve. I promised Papa to take care of you all, and set a good example. And instead of that, I got you into a horrid scrape, and Paul too." Suddenly Dulcie's head went down on her arms, and she began to cry.

Molly was at her sister's side in a moment.

"Don't be so unhappy, darling, please don't," she pleaded, with her arms round Dulcie's neck. "It wasn't any more your fault than mine and Paul's. We really thought we were doing our duty. If Rosy had been a stolen child, and we'd found her family, everybody would have been delighted. I don't believe even Grandma would have scolded then."

"I don't think there are any stolen children in

the world," moaned Dulcie. "They're just in books, and we were very silly to imagine Rosy must be one. She wasn't even very pretty, and she was so dreadfully dirty. I don't see why the people who write books want to put things in that aren't true."

"There was Charlie Ross," said Molly; "he was true."

"He was only one, and there may never have been another. Anyway, we've done something awful, and I don't believe Aunt Julia will ever forgive us for taking Paul to that dreadful place."

"Here come Daisy and Maud," exclaimed Molly, in a tone of relief, as the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon their ears.

At the entrance of her two sisters, Dulcie lifted her head.

"What's the matter?" she demanded tragically. "Are you punished, too? It's only seven o'clock."

"Oh, no," said Daisy, with a great effort to speak in her usual cheerful voice. "Aunt Kate is expecting a missionary, and Grandma said we might as well get out of the way."

"There was ice-cream," announced Maud, "but Daisy wouldn't take any. It was good, too, only Grandma wouldn't let me have two helpings."

"Why didn't you take any, Daisy?" inquired Molly, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Oh, I just thought I wouldn't," returned Daisy,

evasively. "It's nice we could come up so early, isn't it?"

"I know what the reason was," said Dulcie, with conviction. "It was because we couldn't have any, wasn't it, Daisy?"

Daisy blushed, and looked very much embarrassed.

"Well, I couldn't enjoy good things to eat when I knew you had nothing but bread and milk," she admitted, at which Molly promptly threw her arms round her sister's neck, and hugged her.

"I believe you're the best girl in the world, Daisy," Dulcie declared. "We never should have gotten into such a scrape if you had been with us. I knew it wasn't right all the time, but it was such an exciting adventure, and we never had a real adventure in our lives."

"I don't believe I should like an adventure," said Maud, virtuously. "Aunt Julia has put Paul to bed, you know. She's sure he's caught some dreadful disease. She wanted to send for the doctor but Grandma wouldn't let her."

"What kind of a disease is it?" Molly wanted to know.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's something called nerves. That was it, wasn't it, Daisy?"

"Oh, I don't believe Paul is going to be ill at all," said Daisy, reassuringly. "Grandma doesn't think so either. Aunt Kate laughed, and said Paul

wasn't the first boy in the family to come home with a black eye. She was beginning to tell about something that happened when Papa was a boy, when Grandma gave that little cough she always gives when she wants people to stop talking, and Aunt Kate didn't say any more."

"Do you suppose Papa ever fought with anybody when he was a boy?" suggested Molly, her face brightening at the delightful possibility.

"I don't know, but we'll ask him in our next letter. Now let's do something pleasant. It's a whole hour till bedtime."

But for once Daisy's cheerful suggestion failed to meet with its usual response. Neither Dulcie nor Molly felt inclined to do "anything pleasant" that evening. They tried lotto, but before the first game was finished Dulcie had begun to cry again.

"I don't feel like doing anything but going to bed," she announced, with a sob. "My heart's so heavy, I can't take an interest in ordinary things."

"It is pretty dreadful," agreed Maud. "Aunt Julia thinks she will have to take Paul back to Boston. She's afraid he'll want to go on playing with us, and she says we aren't fit to associate with him. I don't think it's quite fair to say all of us, when Daisy and I didn't do a single thing. I wish Miss Polly would sing; it's always comforting to hear music when you're sad."

"Let's go and see Miss Polly," exclaimed Daisy,

with a sudden inspiration. "I haven't heard the piano all day. Perhaps she isn't well."

Dulcie shook her head.

"I can't go," she said, mournfully. "I've cried so much my head aches, and my eyes are all swollen."

"So are mine," added Molly, "and I don't feel like making calls any more than Dulcie does. You and Maud might go, though."

"You go, Daisy," coaxed Maud. "I don't like that dark closet at night. Ask her please to sing 'Only an Armor-Bearer,' or 'Pull For the Shore.'"

"All right," said Daisy, good-naturedly, and after giving the afflicted Dulcie a sympathetic kiss on the back of her bowed head, she tripped away cheerfully on her errand.

The children had become quite accustomed to visiting their neighbor by this time, and the mysterious door in the wall had lost some of its original fascination. Still, there was always a certain thrill of excitement in turning the handle, and the sudden plunge into the housemaid's closet next door. Daisy's heart beat rather fast, as she groped her way amid brooms and dust-pans, and stepped out into the lighted hall. Outside Miss Polly's door she paused for a moment, to make sure the little cripple was alone. Once they had heard voices, and had crept quietly away again, for if the landlady, or any one else in the boarding-house, were to dis-

cover their secret, who knew what might happen? It was possible that Miss Collins might have as strong an objection to an unlocked door between the houses as Grandma herself. But to-night all was quiet, and after a moment's hesitation, Daisy knocked softly.

Instead of the usual sound of the wheel-chair being pushed across the room, a rather unsteady voice called, "Come in."

"Good evening, Miss Polly," said the visitor, cheerfully, as she stepped over the threshold, and closed the door, "I came to ask—why, Miss Polly, what's the matter? Are you ill?"

Miss Polly was not in the wheel-chair; she was in bed, and the face she turned to greet the little girl was very white. But at Daisy's anxious question, she tried to smile her old bright smile.

"No, no, dear, not ill, only a little tired. I asked Maggie to help me to bed before she went out for the evening. Come and sit down. I am glad to have company, but where are the others?"

"They couldn't come very well this evening," said Daisy, blushing. "I can't stay long either; I only came to ask if you would sing something, but of course you can't now you're in bed. Why, Miss Polly, where's the piano?"

"It's gone, dearie," answered Miss Polly, in the same low, unsteady voice in which she had called "come in." "It went away this afternoon. I'm

very sorry, but I'm afraid I won't be able to sing to you any more."

"Oh, Miss Polly," cried Daisy, and stopped short in sudden embarrassment, for her friend's cheeks, which had been so pale a moment before, had flushed a dusky crimson, and there was such a sad look in her eyes that the little girl could not think of another word to say. But Miss Polly was not slow to read the sympathy in her visitor's face.

"Don't look so distressed," she said, kindly. "Come here and sit on the bed, and I'll tell you about it. It was hard, of course, but we all have hard things to bear sometimes, and I ought to be thankful that I was able to keep my dear piano so long."

"Was it the gentleman in the back room who objected?" asked Daisy, as she took the proffered seat on the bed, and slipped her hand into Miss Polly's.

Miss Polly gave the kind little hand an affectionate squeeze.

"No, dear, nobody objected, every one was very kind. Miss Collins even tried to persuade me to keep it a little longer, but I couldn't do that, after I understood about the money."

"What money?" inquired Daisy, with deep interest.

"My money, dear. It isn't all gone, I am thankful to say, but the bank in Vermont, where I

had several hundred dollars, failed the other day, and my lawyer has written me that I have been spending more than I realized these past three years. Of course I couldn't run into debt, so the wisest plan seemed to be to sell ——"

Miss Polly paused abruptly, and put up her hand to shade her eyes.

"You mean to sell the piano?" whispered Daisy, winking hard to keep back the sympathetic tears. "Oh, Miss Polly, and you loved it so."

There was a short silence, then Miss Polly spoke, and though her voice was not as bright as usual, it no longer trembled.

"It seems a little hard just at first," she said, with a faint smile, "but I shall get used to it in time, as I had to other things, that were even harder. It's wonderful to find how kind and sympathetic people are. Why, would you believe it, my dear, that foolish Maggie actually cried when she was putting me to bed. I used to think her a little indifferent sometimes, but I see I was mistaken. My piano was a great pleasure, but I still have my books, and my dear little neighbors too. I shouldn't like to have Tom hear of it, it would grieve him so much, but there isn't any need of his ever knowing."

"He wouldn't have let it happen if he had known," cried Daisy. "Oh, dear Miss Polly, won't you please write him about it? He'd be so unhappy if he ever found out."

Daisy's voice was pleading, but Miss Polly shook her head resolutely.

"My dear," she said, gently, "you don't understand. Some day Tom must know, of course, but not till things are a little easier for him. Miss Collins has been trying to persuade me to write, but I know better. I had a letter from Tom this morning; such a dear letter; I will read it to you."

As she spoke, Miss Polly drew from under her pillow a crumpled sheet of paper, covered with a firm, manly handwriting.

"I think I could almost repeat it by heart," she said, smoothing out the letter with loving fingers. "I keep all his letters, and read them over and over. This one isn't very long, but the dear boy is so busy. It's very good of him to take the time to write at all. Would you like to hear what he says?"

Daisy said she would like it very much, and Miss Polly began to read in a voice that was still a little unsteady.

"DEAR OLD POLLY:

"Your good letter reached us several days ago, and would have been answered sooner but for the fact that I have been working every evening this week, and some nights haven't left the office till after nine. It's a bit hard on that little wife of mine, but I tell her all is grist that comes to our mill, and if things keep on as they have for the past year, it won't be very long before I can begin to let

up a little. Who knows but that we may have our carriage, and our box at the opera, some fine day. Helen laughs when I predict a glorious future, but, joking aside, I have good reason to expect another raise of salary in the spring. My employer, Mr. Anderson, gave me a strong hint to that effect a few days ago.

"We laughed heartily over your description of your interesting little neighbors, who have discovered a secret door in the wall. Rather an unusual find in a New York boarding-house, I should think. It reminds me of some of those thrilling tales we used to read in our childhood. I shall expect to hear next of a secret staircase leading to a dungeon, where a captive princess is kept in concealment. I am glad you find the children so entertaining, but I should think you might be rather tired when evening comes, and prefer some other amusement to singing ballads. However, that is your affair, not mine. All I care about is that you don't work too hard, and wear yourself out. You and Helen will have some fine times over your music, when you make us that long deferred visit, for she is as fond of singing as you are, and I really think you will be pleased with her voice. We have hired a piano, and I generally find her singing away like a nightingale when I come home late of an evening. She says she can't help it; it's the way she has of expressing her happiness. As to your namesake, if she doesn't sing yet, she certainly crows. She is as jolly and healthy as a baby can be, and Helen warns me not to forget to give you the great news, little Polly has cut her first tooth.

"Now, my dear little sister, I must ask you to

pardon a short letter, for it is after eleven P. M. and Helen is beginning to look severe, as she invariably does when she considers I am not getting my proper allowance of sleep. I am delighted to hear that you are enjoying your piano so much. Have you been to any good concerts lately? How about the season ticket for the opera I requested you to buy, with that small Christmas check? Helen and I indulged in a little dissipation one night last week. She met me in town, and we dined at a restaurant, and went to the theatre. It was a great treat, I assure you, and as 'our one and only maid' seems a capable sort of person, Helen was not afraid to leave baby in her care.

"Good night, old girl. Write often, and believe me, as always,

"Your affectionate brother,

"TOM OLIVER."

"Isn't it a dear, kind letter?" said Miss Polly, looking up with shining eyes.

"It's very nice indeed," agreed Daisy, "but, dear Miss Polly, I can't help wishing he knew about everything."

Miss Polly smiled and shook her head.

"No, no, dear," she said, resolutely, "not just yet. Tom and Helen must have a little more time to themselves, and then—well, perhaps in another year. But don't let us talk any more about my tiresome affairs. Tell me what you have all been doing since you came to see me last."

"How long you stayed, Daisy, and Miss Polly

never sang a single song," reproached Maud, when her sister returned to the nursery, at a quarter past eight.

"I couldn't come back any sooner," explained Daisy. "Miss Polly is very unhappy, and I think it comforted her a little to have me stay and talk. I told her all about this afternoon, and she laughed, she really did, Dulcie, and said she wished she could have seen you and Paul fighting that big boy. It was the only time she laughed, for, oh, girls, such a very sad thing has happened. Poor Miss Polly has lost a great deal of money, and she's had to sell her piano."

"I think the world is a very sad place," remarked Dulcie, with a long sigh, when they had heard all that Daisy could tell them of Miss Polly's troubles. "It's been a very uncomfortable day, for everybody. Now let's go to bed, and I'll talk to you about Mamma."

It was nearly half-past nine, and Dulcie's voice had begun to sound decidedly drowsy, when they were all startled into wakefulness by a knock at the nursery door.

"Who is it?" demanded Daisy, sitting up in bed.

"It's me—I, I mean," answered a familiar voice. "I can't stay but a minute, for fear of Mother, but I heard the missionary man talking as if he was preaching a sermon, so I'm sure he can't be going quite yet. I just wanted to tell Dulcie and Molly

I'm not a bit sick, and I don't believe I'm going to be. Mother always fusses a lot, but she doesn't mean it all, and I'm going to write to Father tomorrow, and tell him how plucky Dulcie was."

CHAPTER X

DULCIE'S BIRTHDAY

PAUL was correct in his prediction; he was not ill the next day, nor did he manifest any signs of approaching illness during the following week. His mother was very much surprised. Her sister Kate remarked sarcastically that she believed Julia was disappointed that none of her prognostications of evil came to pass, but when the ninth day was passed, even Mrs. Chester was forced to confess that for once in his life her boy had escaped unharmed. For the first day or two she kept Paul constantly with her, and he and the little girls met only at meals, but as time went on, this strict discipline began to relax, and by the end of the week the children were allowed to play together again. Grandma and Aunt Kate were very busy attending a series of missionary meetings, and had little time or thought to devote to anything else. Otherwise the children's punishment might have been more prolonged. Paul's father had written a letter to his wife, after reading which Mrs. Chester had talked long and seriously to her little boy, and had secured a solemn promise from that small delin-

quent to refrain from any further mischief. Paul was a truthful boy, and when he had once made a promise his mother knew she could trust him to keep it.

"But never, never again shall I allow Paul to go out with those children," Mrs. Chester declared to her mother and sister. "Goodness only knows what mischief they might lead the dear child into."

"They may get into plenty of mischief," returned Grandma, with her grim smile, "but I will engage there won't be any more attempts to find a stolen child."

And Mrs. Winslow was correct. The very words "stolen child" were sufficient to cause Dulcie's cheeks to burn with mortification, and bring the tears of humiliation to Molly's eyes.

But children cannot go on thinking of unpleasant things for very long at a time, and by the end of the second week the events of that dreadful afternoon had ceased to be the foremost thought in any of their minds.

"You and Dulcie must stay down-stairs this evening," Molly informed Paul, one afternoon just before dinner. "Daisy and Maud and I are going to be very busy."

"What are you going to be busy about?" Paul inquired, with pardonable curiosity. He rather enjoyed the evenings in the nursery, with the little girls, for since the arrival of the Chesters, Grandma

had not insisted on their remaining in the dining-room after dinner.

"To-morrow is Dulcie's birthday," explained Molly, "and we've got to do up the presents this evening."

Paul looked interested.

"What presents is she going to have?" he asked.

"Well," said Molly, not without some embarrassment, "you see, it isn't very easy to arrange. If we had some money, we'd buy presents, of course, but we haven't any of us got a penny. Papa sent us each five dollars for Christmas, but Grandma put it in the bank for us, and we can't get it out again till we're of age, and that won't be for ever so many years. So we have to give something we have already. Daisy made a book-mark, but we couldn't all do that, because Dulcie only reads one book at a time. Daisy and I both wanted to give her our Sunday hats, because hers got spotted in the rain, but we were afraid Grandma wouldn't let us. I'm giving her some of my hair-ribbons; they're not new, but they're quite good yet, and Dulcie loves hair-ribbons. Maud wanted to give some of her paper dolls, but we think twelve is too old for dolls, so she's decided to give her gold locket that Papa gave her before he went away. It's very pretty, and there is some of Mamma's hair in it. We're going to tie the parcels up to-night, and write mes-

sages on them. Daisy does the writing, and we say things like 'For Dulcie, from her loving sister Molly,' or 'With loving birthday wishes, from Maud.' It's really quite exciting doing up the presents."

"I shouldn't think it would be much fun, when you haven't anything to do up but your own old things," objected Paul. "What are Grandma and Aunt Kate going to give?"

"Grandma and Aunt Kate!" repeated Molly, in astonishment, "why, they never give presents except on Christmas, and then Grandma only gave us some woolen stockings, and Aunt Kate gave us each a cake of scented soap. Grandma says nobody ever gave her a birthday present in her life."

"I got a lot of things on my birthday," said Paul. "Father gave me a velocipede, and Mother a lot of books, and—I say, I'd like to give Dulcie a present, too. Father gave me five dollars to spend in New York. What do you think she'd like?"

"Oh, Paul, how kind you are!" cried Molly, her face beaming with pleasure. "I know a book she wants dreadfully, and she never can get it at the library, because it's always out. It's 'Little Men,' by Miss Alcott. We've all read 'Little Women,' and we loved it, but 'Little Men' has been out every time Dulcie asked for it."

"All right," said Paul, grandly, "she shall have it. I'll get Mother to take me to a bookstore to-

morrow. Do you always give each other your old things for birthday presents?"

"Yes, at least we have since Papa went away. Daisy's birthday comes in May, and mine is in July. I suppose Dulcie will give the locket to Daisy, because it's about the nicest thing we've got, and perhaps—I don't know, of course—but Daisy may give it to me when my birthday comes. Maud's birthday isn't till September, and by that time I can give it back to her again."

"Well, it's the queerest way of giving presents that I ever heard of," declared Paul. "I shouldn't like it one bit, but I suppose you don't mind so much if you're used to it."

"There isn't any use minding what you can't help," said Molly, philosophically, and just then the dinner-bell rang, and the conversation came to an end.

Immediately after dinner the three younger girls left the dining-room, and Dulcie, looking quite happy and excited, sat down to spend a silent evening with her elders. Paul would have liked to follow the others, but was too proud to go where he had not been invited, so having nothing better to do, he consented with unusually good grace to his mother's proposal that he should read a chapter or two of ancient history.

"To-morrow is your birthday, isn't it?" Paul observed to Dulcie, as the two children went upstairs together, at eight o'clock.

"Yes," said Dulcie, smiling; "that's why the others went up so early; they wanted to tie up the presents."

"Have you any idea what you're going to get?" Paul asked, curiously.

"Not the very least, and it's so exciting wondering about it." And Dulcie laughed, such a happy laugh, that Paul gazed at her in bewilderment.

"I hope she won't be disappointed," he said to himself. "I wish I'd known about that book before, so I could have bought it in time. I should be disappointed enough if I didn't get anything but old junk for my birthday, and I guess most people would, too."

But when Dulcie came down to breakfast the next morning, she did not look in the least disappointed. She was wearing a pink hair-ribbon, which Paul remembered to have noticed as a favorite color with Molly, and round her neck, attached to a piece of black velvet, was a tiny gold locket.

"Happy birthday," remarked Paul, as Dulcie slipped into her seat at the table. "Did you like your presents?"

"I loved them," answered Dulcie, heartily. "I woke up before six, and took all the packages into bed; I was so crazy to see what they were."

At that moment Grandma looked up from the morning paper, to inquire sharply:

"What's that round your neck, Dulcie?"

"It's my locket," said Dulcie, proudly, touching the trinket with loving fingers. "It was Maud's, but she gave it to me for a birthday present. Papa gave it to her, and there's a piece of Mamma's hair in it."

"Take it off the moment you go up-stairs," commanded Mrs. Winslow. "Children don't wear jewelry in the morning. I am surprised you didn't know better than to put it on."

Dulcie's face fell, and she grew suddenly scarlet, but she said nothing, and no further allusions were made on the subject of birthdays.

The morning was taken up with lessons, as usual, and after luncheon the four little girls were sent out for their daily exercise in the Square. They were not allowed to go far from home by themselves, and as it was a cold, dark afternoon, with a strong wind blowing, they did not find the solemn walk round and round the Square particularly enjoyable. Dulcie left the others for a few minutes, while she made a call at the circulating library, whence she returned looking rather crest-fallen.

"Did you get it this time?" Daisy inquired, eagerly.

Dulcie shook her head.

"Out as usual," she said. "I got 'Heartsease,' by Charlotte Yonge, but I don believe it's half as nice as 'Little Men.'"

Molly heard both question and answer, and looked suddenly pleased and mysterious.

Paul had gone out with his mother, but on his return, at about four o'clock, he ran up-stairs to the nursery, two steps at a time. He was carrying a parcel under his arm. He found his four friends already returned from their walk, and somewhat to his surprise, three of them—including Dulcie herself—did not look very much pleased to see him.

"What are you all doing?" he inquired, with some curiosity, for it was evident that his entrance had interrupted something.

"Oh, just playing," answered Daisy, blushing, and Dulcie added hastily: "It's a very silly game; you wouldn't care about it."

"How do you know I wouldn't?" demanded the visitor, who was standing in the doorway, with one hand behind him.

"Because I know you wouldn't; it isn't a boy's game at all."

"Well, I think you might tell me what it is, anyway," said Paul, rather offended, and Molly, who had noticed the parcel in her friend's hand, hastened to say soothingly:

"There isn't any harm in telling him; I don't believe he'll laugh. We're having a make-believe party, Paul."

"What's a make-believe party?"

"Why, you see," Daisy explained, "this is

Dulcie's birthday, and we wanted to do something a little different from ordinary days. Of course Grandma wouldn't let us have a real party, so we're having an imaginary one, and all the people who come to it are make-believes."

Paul laughed.

"That's the funniest party I ever heard of," he said. "I say, let me play, too."

Dulcie and Daisy looked doubtful, but Molly pleaded, and in the end the others consented, after exacting a promise from Paul not to laugh, and never to let the grown-ups know how silly they had been.

"We pretend this is the parlor," said Molly. "We are all dressed in party dresses. Mine is pink silk, with white dotted muslin over it. There's an imaginary piano over there by the window, and a man is playing dance music on it. Dulcie stands here by the door, and shakes hands with people when they come in. I announce their names, and everybody brings her a present. I'll show you how we do it." And, turning her head in the direction of the open door, Molly announced in a good imitation of "Grandma's company voice":

"Miss Blanche Bud."

Dulcie advanced and held out her hand.

"I'm very glad to see you, Blanche," she said. "It was lovely of you to come to my party. Your dress is very pretty. Oh, are these flowers for me?"

How very sweet of you to bring them. Maud, please put these roses in water."

"Isn't it fun?" giggled Maud, seizing the imaginary bouquet from her sister's outstretched hand. "If I shut my eyes tight, and pretend very hard, I can almost make myself believe it's a real party."

Paul was finding some difficulty in keeping his promise not to laugh.

"Let me come next," he urged, and Molly, with another glance at the mysterious package in Paul's hand, announced:

"Master Paul Chester."

"How do you do, Paul?" said Dulcie, gravely. "I'm glad you could come. It's rather a cloudy day, isn't it?"

"Many happy returns of the day, and here's a present for you," said Paul, thrusting his parcel into Dulcie's hand, and instantly retreating to the background.

"Why—why, it's a real present!" cried Dulcie, quite forgetting the make-believe party in her surprise.

"Let me help untie the string," pleaded Maud. "I love to open parcels. Oh, it's a book. Dulcie likes books better than most any other presents, Paul."

"It's 'Little Men,'" said Dulcie, with shining eyes; "the book I've been wanting for so long! How did you know I wanted it, Paul?"

"Molly told me," said Paul, who was feeling much gratified at the excitement produced by his gift. "I bought it this afternoon when I was out with Mother. She said I ought to write something in it, but there wasn't time. I'll write it now."

"All right," said Dulcie, hugging her new treasure tight. "Oh, Paul, I do thank you so much. What would you like to write?"

"Well," said Paul, reflectively, "Mother thought something French would be nice, but I hate French. I think 'From Paul Chester to his affectionate friend Dulcie Winslow' would be all right, don't you? Or would you rather have some poetry? I know a lot of poetry."

Dulcie said she liked Paul's first suggestion best, and the little boy sat down at the desk to write the inscription.

"It's the first really nice birthday present you've had, Dulcie," said Daisy, joyfully; "I'm so glad you got it."

"They were all nice," declared Dulcie, giving her sister an affectionate squeeze. "I loved every single one. I'm awfully glad to have 'Little Men,' though. I'll read it out loud this evening, if you like. Have you finished, Paul? Oh, how beautifully you write."

Paul looked pleased.

"I like buying presents for people," he said, grandly. "Mother said she was glad I was gener-

ous, but she didn't think I need spend so much money. I told her I wanted to, because I liked Dulcie, and I thought it was real mean nobody gave her anything new for her birthday."

"What did your mother say?" Dulcie asked, with pardonable curiosity.

"Oh, she said Grandma had a pretty hard time keeping you all here, and we mustn't expect too much of her. Now let's go on with that party. What do you do about things to eat?"

"I'm afraid they'll have to be imaginary, like all the rest of it," said Dulcie, laughing. "Grandma won't let us bring food up here, and we're not allowed to eat between meals, anyway. Why, here comes Mary. What is it, Mary? Does Grandma want us?"

"It's a package for you, Miss Dulcie," said Mary, rather breathless from the four long flights of stairs. "It came by express, and I thought you might like to have it right away. Mrs. Winslow's out, and Miss Kate, too."

"Why, what in the world can it be?" cried Dulcie, and all the others gathered about her eagerly, as she untied the string.

"It's a wooden box," announced Molly.

"Maybe it's a birthday present from Papa," suggested Maud.

"Or from Lizzie," added Daisy.

"It's from California," said Paul; "I see Cali-

fornia on the back. Do you know anybody there?"

"Yes, Uncle Stephen and Miss Leslie," said Dulcie; "it must be from one of them, but how did they know this was my birthday?"

"There's a letter inside," cried Molly. "Let's read it before we open the box, then we'll know who sent it."

"Why not see what's in the box first?" objected Paul, who was almost as much interested in the contents of the mysterious package as the little girls themselves.

"Because," said Daisy, "it's so exciting to anticipate, and as soon as we know what's inside the box the excitement will be over. Do read the letter first, Dulcie."

"It might be only soap, you know," suggested Maud, with a recollection of Aunt Kate's Christmas present.

"The letter is from Miss Leslie," cried Dulcie, who, obedient to Daisy's request, had already torn open the envelope. "Oh, isn't it lovely? Listen to what she says." And she read aloud:

"MY DEAR DULCIE:

"I was going to say 'little Dulcie,' but remembered just in time that people of twelve don't like to be considered 'little' any longer, and if I am not mistaken, you are going to have a birthday on the twentieth. Now I suppose you are wonder-

ing what little bird brought me that interesting piece of news, and I am not going to tell you, because it is fun to keep guessing. I am sending a box of our preserved California fruit, which I hope may reach you on the right day.

"I was delighted with your nice letter, and very much interested in the brave little invalid next door. I agree with you that her brother ought to know of her condition, but if she will persist in being so unselfish and heroic, I don't see that her friends can do anything to help matters. I am glad you go to see her often, and as to the door in the wall ——"

Dulcie came to a sudden startled pause. All the little girls had grown very much embarrassed.

"What's the matter? Why don't you go on?" demanded Paul, in astonishment.

"I can't," said Dulcie, "it's a secret. I ought to have stopped before, but I didn't notice."

Paul looked disappointed and a little offended.

"I can keep secrets just as well as anybody else," he said, sulkily, "but of course if you don't want me to hear, I won't listen." And he turned to leave the room, with an air of injured dignity.

It was an awkward moment. Nobody wanted to offend Paul, especially after his generosity in giving Dulcie a birthday present. And yet, could he be trusted with this precious secret? It was Daisy who finally settled the difficulty.

"I believe we can trust Paul," she said, with sudden decision. "I'm sure a nice boy can keep a

promise. Finish the letter first, Dulcie, and then let's tell him all about Miss Polly."

So Dulcie, after making sure that Mary had gone down-stairs again, and impressing upon Paul that what he was about to hear was "a very solemn secret indeed," went on with her letter.

"As to the door in the wall," Miss Leslie wrote, "it is certainly very interesting and romantic. I don't think I ought to advise you to keep a secret from your grandmother, but, as you say the door has been unfastened for years, and no one has ever discovered the fact before, it doesn't seem as if there could be much harm in keeping the secret a little longer. I am glad you have written your father about it, however, for his advice in the matter will be much better than mine.

"Mamma and I have been very busy since our return from the East, or I would have written sooner. California is very beautiful just now. I wish you could see the roses in our garden, and hear the mocking-birds sing. There is a nest right outside my window. I would love to have you all out here for a visit, but am afraid your grandmother would never consent to your taking such a long journey. We were six days on the train, but Mamma and I rather enjoyed it. I have seen your uncle several times since our return. He is very well, and busy, as we all are.

"Now, my dear little girl, I must say good-bye for to-day. Write soon again and tell me all you do, for I am interested in everything that concerns my little friends. Give a great deal of love to Daisy, Molly, and Maud, and with an equal share

for yourself, and best wishes for a very happy birthday, believe me,

“Your sincere friend,
“FLORENCE LESLIE.”

“What a beautiful letter!” exclaimed Daisy. “How do you suppose she found out about your birthday?”

“I suppose Uncle Stephen must have told her, but I didn’t think he knew. It was dear of her to write, and to send such a wonderful present.”

“I’ve looked inside the box,” Maud informed them, “and it’s full of big sticky, delicious-looking things. May I taste one right away, Dulcie?”

“Of course you may. We’ll all have some. Oh, I do wish Uncle Stephen would hurry up and marry Miss Leslie. It would be so nice to have her for an aunt.”

“Hurry and tell about that door in the wall,” put in Paul, a little impatiently. “I’ve promised I won’t tell anybody, and I don’t see why you want to keep me waiting any longer.”

“We won’t,” said Dulcie, and while they all munched the delicious candied fruit, they told him the story of brave little Miss Polly.

“We miss the piano very much,” said Maud, when the story was finished, and Paul was looking as deeply interested as could possibly be expected. “It used to be so nice to hear Miss Polly singing when we were going to sleep.”

"I'm afraid Miss Polly misses it very much, too," said Daisy, sadly. "She doesn't say anything about it, but her eyes have such a sorrowful look in them, and she doesn't laugh nearly as often as she did before."

"I'd like to go and see her," said Paul. "I'll sing to her if she wants me to."

"Why, Paul, we didn't know you could sing," cried Dulcie, in surprise. "We never heard you."

Paul blushed.

"I hate doing it generally," he confessed. "Mother makes me sometimes, to show off, you know, and I'm going to be in the choir next year. I don't mind singing for that lady if you think she'd like to have me. I know some French songs, and 'The Holy City,' and 'most all the songs in 'Pinafore.' I can say a lot of poetry, too."

"Let's go to see Miss Polly right away, and take Paul with us," urged Molly, eagerly. "It will be much more fun than having a make-believe party, won't it, Dulcie? And we can take her some of this lovely fruit. We've been wanting to give her a present ever since the first time we went, but we never had anything to take before."

CHAPTER XI

PAUL ENTERTAINS MISS POLLY

MISS POLLY was in her wheel-chair, which she had drawn as close as possible to the register, for the day was cold, and only a small amount of furnace heat reached the top floor. She had evidently been reading, but the book had fallen into her lap, and lay there neglected, while the little cripple gazed straight before her, with a sad, far-away look in her eyes. Miss Polly was certainly thinner and paler than on that Sunday when Molly had made her first visit, but when, at the sound of a knock at her door, she turned to greet her little neighbors, her smile was as bright and her voice as cheerful as ever.

"My dear children," she cried joyfully, "how glad I am to see you. And you've brought your visitor, too. How do you do, Paul? You see I know your name. These little friends of mine have told me a great deal about you. It was kind of you to come to see me."

Paul stepped forward and held out his hand.

"I'll sing for you if you'd like to have me," he announced abruptly. "I don't like doing it gener-

ally, but I don't mind this time. Dulcie says you like music."

Miss Polly beamed.

"I do indeed," she said, heartily. "I should love to hear you sing. It was dear of you to think of offering."

"Do you like hand-organs?" inquired Paul, gravely. "There was a very nice one playing in front of our house this morning. It played six tunes, and there was a monkey. I threw out five cents, and the monkey took off his hat. If you give an organ-man five cents, he'll generally play for quite a long time."

Miss Polly smiled, and said that hand-organs were sometimes rather pleasant, and then Dulcie—who had been eagerly awaiting her turn to speak—came forward with her offering.

"We've brought you a present," she said. "It's some candied fruit that Miss Leslie sent us all the way from California, and it's delicious. We wanted you to have some, but I'm sorry we hadn't a nicer box to put it in."

"It's really Dulcie's present," put in Daisy. "Miss Leslie sent it for her birthday, so we ought not to be thanked. We all wanted to bring you a present, but this is the first time we ever had anything we thought you would enjoy."

Miss Polly was warm in her thanks, and at Maud's request, consented to try a candied apricot,

which she pronounced to be delicious. Then she asked some questions about the birthday, and was told the story of the family presents and "the make-believe party."

"Make-believe things are really quite good fun sometimes, when you can't have real ones," remarked Daisy, cheerfully, when the story—to which Miss Polly had listened with much interest—was finished. "Once Aunt Kate wanted our old dolls to put in a missionary box, and we thought it would be selfish not to let the poor little missionary children have them. We missed them very much at first, but then we played we had a whole family of imaginary children, that nobody could see but ourselves, and it was so interesting we forgot all about the dolls. It was very nice afterwards, for the missionary's little girl wrote us a letter, and told us how much she and her sister were enjoying our dolls. She described the log-house where they live, away out West, where the Indians are, and it was so interesting. We've got the letter still. Would you like to see it?"

Miss Polly said she would like it very much, and then, noticing signs of impatience on Paul's part, she asked him if he would like to begin to sing.

"All right," said the small boy, promptly. "I guess I'll sing 'The Holy City' first. You might not understand the French songs." And without further hesitation, he began to sing in a voice so

clear and true that the little girls gazed at him in speechless surprise and admiration.

There were actually tears in Miss Polly's eyes when the song ended, and her "Oh, my dear, that was a treat!" sounded so genuine that Paul's bosom swelled with pride.

"I'll sing '*Au Claire De La Lune*' next," he said, condescendingly, "and if you don't understand French, I'll translate it into English."

It appeared, however, that Miss Polly did understand French, and perhaps the next half-hour was the most enjoyable the invalid had spent since the day when her beloved piano was taken away. Paul sang song after song, some in English, others in French, some sad, some gay; ending with several selections from "Pinafore," the charming operetta, which had taken the world by storm a year before.

"You have given me more pleasure than I can express," Miss Polly said, when they had all stopped laughing over "The Ruler of the Queen's Navee," and Paul had been forced to admit that his throat was getting tired. "You have a beautiful voice, my boy; your mother must be very proud of you."

"She is," said Paul, innocently. "She's always wanting to show me off; that's why I hate it so."

"We should not hate to do anything that gives other people pleasure," said Miss Polly gently.

Paul reddened.

"I don't hate singing for you," he said, bluntly. "I'd do it every day, only we're going back to Boston next Monday. Would you like to have me say some poetry?"

"I would indeed," said Miss Polly, whereupon Paul proceeded to give them "Young Lochinvar," "The Baron's Last Banquet," and several more of the famous old ballads, known to almost every schoolboy of the past generation. He had been well taught, and as he was really fond of poetry, the recitations were given in a spirit which quite thrilled the younger members of his audience.

"You really are an awfully clever boy, Paul," remarked Molly, in a tone of some awe, at the conclusion of "Bingen on the Rhine." "Aunt Julia always said you were, but since we've known you we thought perhaps she might have made a mistake."

"That's because I don't like showing off," said Paul, quite unruffled by this rather uncomplimentary observation. "I don't mind doing things for Miss Polly, though. I say, Miss Polly, if you'd like to have that organ-man with the monkey come every day, I think perhaps I could arrange it. I've got 'most three dollars, and I could leave it with the girls, and tell them to give him ten cents every time he came. An organ-man will come very often to a place if he knows he's going to get ten cents every time."

Miss Polly laughed her old merry laugh, and then she suddenly drew Paul to her side.

"You dear, kind little boy," she said, and before the embarrassed Paul fully realized her intention, she had kissed him.

Paul drew away; he had grown very red.

"I don't like to have anybody kiss me except Mother," he said, ungraciously, "but I'd be real glad to leave that money for the organ-man." But in spite of the ungracious words, Paul was not nearly so much offended as he would like to appear, and perhaps Miss Polly understood, for she only smiled.

"I'm afraid we must go now," said Dulcie, rising reluctantly. "It's nearly dinner-time, and Aunt Julia will wonder where Paul is."

"Well, you have given me a very happy afternoon," said Miss Polly, "and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. It is very kind of you to want to give me the pleasure of that hand-organ, Paul, but I think I would a little rather have you spend your money in some other way. I shall not forget your offer, though, and I hope you may be able to make me another visit before you go back to Boston."

"Isn't she a darling?" exclaimed Molly, the moment Miss Polly's door closed behind them, to which Paul replied, with unusual gravity:

"She's about the nicest lady I ever saw, and she's awfully pretty, too. It must be awful to have to

stay in that room all the time, and never even go down-stairs. I wish she'd let me do that thing about the organ-man."

Although it was later than the children suspected, fortune favored Paul. His mother had been engaged with visitors for more than an hour, and when the front door closed behind the last one, at a quarter to six, and Mrs. Chester hurried up-stairs to dress for dinner, she found her small son dutifully brushing his hair before the mirror.

"Well, and have you and the little girls had a pleasant afternoon together?" she asked, kindly.

"Yes'm," answered Paul, giving his red crop a final pat with the hair-brush. "Dulcie loved the book. It was the only new present she had, except the candy the lady from California sent."

"What is this I hear about a package that came for Dulcie by express this afternoon?" inquired Grandma, as the four little girls trooped into the dining-room at six o'clock. "Mary has been telling me about it."

"It was a birthday present from Miss Leslie," said Dulcie, "a box of the loveliest candied fruit. Wasn't it kind of her to send it, Grandma?"

Mrs. Winslow frowned.

"Candied fruit," she repeated. "I suppose that means you have all been eating between meals—a thing you are strictly forbidden to do. Go up-stairs

at once, and bring the box down here to me. You should have done so when it first arrived."

Dulcie gave a little gasp of dismay. It was true they had all helped themselves from the box, but that was not by any means the worst thing that had happened, for in her eagerness to give poor Miss Polly a present, she had emptied out more than half the contents of Miss Leslie's gift. How was Grandma to be made to understand that they had not eaten all that fruit themselves, without betraying their precious secret? She and her sisters might be willing to assume the rôle of little gourmands, but would Paul? However, there was no help for it. No one had ever dared deliberately to disobey Grandma. So, with an agonized glance at her four companions, who had all turned a little pale, Dulcie left the room.

The family were already at the dinner-table when she returned, carrying the telltale box, which certainly did feel painfully light, considering its size, and set it down on the table beside Grandma's plate.

"It took you long enough to get it," Mrs. Winslow said, dryly. "The next time you receive a present, don't try to conceal it from me. Just as I supposed; the box is half empty already."

"Let me see, Mother," said Mrs. Chester, anxiously. "Good gracious, Paul, have you been eating all those dreadful sweet things between meals?"

"I ate some," Paul admitted. The little girls

were all casting imploring glances at the sharer of their secret.

"Some!" cried Mrs. Chester, reproachfully. "You must have eaten quantities. What shall I do, Mother? He is sure to be ill to-morrow; he has such a delicate digestion."

"They must all be punished, of course," was Grandma's instant decision. "They have chosen to make little pigs of themselves, and must take the consequences. They shall each have a dose of castor oil before going to bed, and as they cannot possibly be hungry at present, they can go up to the nursery, where Mary will bring them each a bowl of bread and milk, which is all the dinner they require."

Paul had grown scarlet. Twice he opened his lips to speak, and the little girls held their breaths, but each time he closed them resolutely, and when the four chairs were pushed back from the table, in obedience to Grandma's mandate, he rose with the rest. His only protest was against the threatened dose.

"I'll eat bread and milk if I've got to," he compromised, "but I won't take that nasty castor oil."

"You will do as you are told," said Grandma, sternly, and although Paul's mother looked distressed, she dared not interfere.

"Oh, Paul, you are a brave, splendid boy," whis-

pered Molly, gratefully, as the five little culprits went solemnly up-stairs together. "We were so afraid you were going to tell."

Paul shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I promised I wouldn't tell," he said. "Father says it's dishonorable to break a promise. I don't mind bread and milk very much—it's better than soup with onions in it, anyway—but you don't suppose she really meant that about the castor oil, do you?"

"I'm afraid she did," said Dulcie. "Grandma never says things she doesn't mean. Will you mind it so very much, Paul? It isn't so awfully bad if you take it in orange juice, and drink it very fast, so you don't have time to taste."

Paul made a wry face.

"It's nasty," he said. "I never took it but once. That was when I ate green apples, and Mother thought I was going to die. I won't tell, though, you needn't be scared, I won't tell, no matter what happens."

They had reached the nursery by this time, and Dulcie paused in the act of turning up the gas.

"Paul," she said, impressively, "I think you are one of the nicest boys in this world. If you'd lived in the time of the martyrs, I'm almost sure you would have been one. That saint boy who stood and shouted that he was a Christian, while they were shooting him with arrows, was about the bravest one

I ever read about, but if you'd been alive then, I believe you'd have done just the same."

Paul was very much flattered.

"Perhaps I might," he admitted, modestly. "I'd like to read about him. Have you got the book?"

"No, I got it out of the library, but I can try to get it again, if you would like to read it. Do you think you will really be able to swallow that castor oil without telling you didn't eat all that fruit?"

Paul nodded reassuringly.

"I can do anything I make up my mind to," he said. "I'd rather do 'most anything than not be allowed to go and see Miss Polly again. I've thought of lots of interesting things to tell her. I'm sure she'd like to hear about our telephone."

"What's a telephone?" inquired Molly, who had never heard the word before.

"Oh, it's a wonderful thing. It's like a speaking tube, only you have to ring a bell, and then you hear a voice asking what number you want, and you say, and if it's the number of your father's office, and he's there, he answers you. Not many people have telephones in their houses yet, but we have one, and Father says he wouldn't be surprised if some day everybody had them, and you would be talking from New York to Boston, just as easy as you call down to Bridget through the tube."

This last announcement was almost too great a strain on politeness.

"Of course you're just making up a story," said Daisy, while Molly and Maud giggled derisively. "You couldn't possibly hear your father's voice when he was down-town in his office and you were at home."

"I can, too," maintained Paul. "If you ever come to Boston I'll show you. Maybe there are some telephones in New York, but I'm not sure. Father says Boston is generally ahead of other places."

Molly and Maud still looked unconvinced, and even Daisy would have liked to argue the point, but Dulcie, who felt that Paul was entitled to a great deal of consideration that evening, hastened to change the subject.

"Let's talk some more about Miss Polly," she said rather hurriedly. "Did you see that photograph of her brother on the bureau? I think he has a very kind face."

So no more was said on the subject of telephones, and in a short time Mary appeared with the five bowls of bread and milk. The evening that followed seemed unusually long. It was impossible to settle down to reading or playing games, with the awful shadow of castor oil hanging over them.

"I wish Grandma would hurry up and give it to us," complained Molly. "Things aren't as bad when they really happen as when you're expecting them." Daisy shuddered.

"Let's think about something else," she said. "Read 'Little Men,' Dulcie. Perhaps we'll get so much interested we'll forget about the oil."

Dulcie consented, but even the fascination of Miss Alcott's charming story was powerless to drive away unpleasant anticipations, and when at eight o'clock Grandma's familiar footstep was heard ascending the stairs, the five little faces were very pale and troubled. But though Paul was pale, he was resolute. Not once did his courage fail, and when his turn came, he swallowed the disagreeable dose without a murmur.

"I had no idea I should grow so fond of Paul," remarked Dulcie to Daisy, when they were all in bed. "I'm glad we told him about Miss Polly. I know she loved hearing him sing."

"Paul is a very nice boy," agreed Daisy, "but I'm afraid he doesn't always tell the truth. That thing about the telephone couldn't possibly be true."

"It was just a story," said Dulcie, indulgently. "People often make up stories just for fun. Why, it wasn't any sillier than the story I made up about the fairy who lives in a music-box, and when people wound it up, they could hear a real voice singing inside."

"But we all knew that was only a make-up," objected Daisy. "We knew it wasn't true. But Paul really tried to make us believe they had that

wonderful thing in his house, and he looked so serious when he was telling it, that if it hadn't been so perfectly impossible, I think I should have believed it was true."

CHAPTER XII

DAISY WRITES A LETTER

THE May of 1880 was long remembered as the hottest spring month in many years. Not a drop of rain fell between April and June, and for weeks the sun poured down upon the city streets, with almost the scorching heat of July. Many people left town earlier than usual, and the ferries and the near-by beaches were thronged with tourists, in search of a cool breeze. But in the Winslow house things went on much as usual. For years it had been Mrs. Winslow's custom to remain in town until June fifteenth, on which date she moved her household to the old family homestead on the Hudson, there to remain for precisely three months, and she was not a person to be turned from a custom of years by a little hot weather.

How the children longed for Lizzie, and the trips to Central Park. The daily walk in Washington Square seemed very tame and uninteresting in comparison, and on some afternoons the heat there was almost unbearable. But they were not allowed to venture farther from home, and without car-fare the trip to Central Park was an impossibility. Lessons

became a daily drudgery, which even Dulcie dreaded, and Miss Hammond was so tired and nervous, after a long winter's work, that she was not much better able to teach than her pupils were to study.

Daisy, who was not very strong, suffered more than the others, and became so pale and languid that even Grandma noticed it, and administered a most disagreeable tonic three times a day, which made the approach of meal-times a veritable nightmare to the child. The tonic helped Daisy's appetite, but did not cure the headaches, and the little girl spent more than one hot afternoon lying on the nursery sofa, while Dulcie or Molly sponged her forehead with cold water drawn from the tap in the bath-room.

It was a broiling Sunday afternoon, towards the end of the month, and Daisy was just recovering from one of those distressing headaches. The others had all gone to afternoon service, with Grandma and Aunt Kate, but she had been excused, because she had grown so white and faint during the morning service that Grandma had been obliged to send her out of church before the sermon, with Molly to look after her, and take her home. But a long nap on the sofa, with her head swathed in a wet towel, had cured the headache, and as the clock struck four she awoke to the realization that she was feeling much better.

"I believe I'll go and see Miss Polly," she decided, after a little reflection. "We haven't any of us

been for more than a week, and if I try to read my head may get bad again."

So she rose from the sofa, and having removed the wet towel, and smoothed her hair, started for her call. But just outside the nursery door she paused, and her face brightened.

"I'll run down to the yard first, and pick her a bunch of syringa," she said to herself. "The bush is all out, and Grandma will never notice if I take a little. Miss Polly loves flowers."

Accordingly, instead of going to the trunk-room, she ran down the three flights of stairs to the dining-room, and out through the open French window, to the little balcony, from which a flight of steps descended to the back yard. It was a large sunny yard, and in old Dr. Winslow's time had been quite a garden, but Grandma did not take much interest in flowers, and there was little of the garden left, except a syringa bush and a few rose-bushes, which seldom bloomed until after the family had gone away for the summer. It was Mary's Sunday out, but Bridget was entertaining visitors in the kitchen. Daisy could hear their voices, as she hastily plucked a small bunch of the fragrant flowers. She dared not take many, lest Grandma should notice, and ask awkward questions. She was just turning back to the steps, when her ear caught some words uttered by one of Bridget's visitors.

"She's awful bad," the woman was saying; "I

don't believe she'll last the summer through. It's a terrible pity, for a sweeter, kinder little thing never lived in this world, and as to her patience, stayin' all day long, with never a soul to speak to, it just makes you ashamed to complain about anything yourself."

Daisy stood still, and her heart gave a sudden throb. Could they be talking of Miss Polly? She remembered that Bridget and Mary knew some of the servants in the boarding-house next door.

"Ain't she got nobody belongin' to her?" Bridget asked, sympathetically.

"She's got a brother somewhere, but I guess he don't care much about her. He never comes to see her, anyhow. If Miss Collins was at home I wouldn't worry, but she's gone off to take care of her sick sister in Virginia, and Mrs. Brown, who's looking after the house while she's away, don't take no more interest in poor little Miss Polly than if she wasn't there at all. Why, the poor thing don't eat enough to keep a canary alive, and she's gettin' paler and thinner before your eyes."

"I suppose you wouldn't dare have a doctor to see her, would you, Maggie?" put in another voice.

What Maggie answered Daisy did not wait to hear. She had heard enough already, and her heart was very heavy, as she mounted the steps, with her precious flowers. Until that moment she had not realized how much she had grown to love Miss Polly.

"She mustn't die, oh, she mustn't!" thought the little girl, winking back the rising tears. "Oh, if she would only write to her brother, and tell him all about everything!" And she thought of the kind, handsome face in the photograph on Miss Polly's bureau.

But by the time she reached her friend's door, she had succeeded in controlling the desire to cry, although her voice had not quite its usual cheerful sound. Miss Polly seldom came to the door now, and this afternoon she was not even in her wheelchair, but lying upon her bed, reading her Bible. But her greeting was as hearty as ever, and she buried her face in the bunch of syringa, with a little cry of delight.

"Oh, my dear," she said, joyfully, "you don't know what a pleasure you have brought me. It is so odd; I was dreaming last night of my old home in Vermont, and I could see the syringa-bush that grew by the parsonage gate. It was all so real that when I woke it seemed as if I must have really been there. Would you mind putting these in water for me? There's an extra glass on the wash-stand. I can't bear to have them fade, and if you stand the glass on the little table beside my bed, I can look at them and smell them all the evening. I am afraid I have been very lazy to-day. It was so warm this morning, and I felt so tired, that I thought I would just lie in bed for a while, and later it seemed hardly

worth while getting up for such a few hours. It's Maggie's day out, too, and I don't like to trouble her more than I can help. Oh, how nicely you have arranged the flowers! Now come and sit down, and tell me all about what you have been doing lately."

Daisy complied, but as she talked, telling of the little every-day happenings, it seemed as if her heart grew heavier and heavier. How thin Miss Polly's hands were, and there surely did not used to be those great hollows in her cheeks. Try as she might, she could not always keep the quiver out of her voice. Miss Polly's quick ear did not fail to notice the fact.

"What is it, dearie?" she asked gently, laying a soft little hand on Daisy's. "Is something troubling you? Don't you feel well to-day?"

"Not very," Daisy admitted, glad of this excuse; "I've had a headache all day. I had to go out of church before the sermon, and Grandma didn't like it. I think she was afraid I pretended my head was worse than it was, but I didn't really."

"I am sure you didn't," said Miss Polly, smiling, "although I have heard of 'Sunday headaches' before. My brother Tom used to have them when he was a boy, and Father finally cured him by insisting that if he were not able to go to church, he must go to bed, and stay there for the rest of the day. It proved quite a wonderful cure."

Daisy laughed, but in a moment she was grave again.

"I wish Grandma would believe us," she said. "We don't tell stories, but she thinks we do, and it makes Dulcie so angry. We try to remember that she's an old lady, and that we are only her step-grandchildren, anyway, but it is a little hard sometimes, especially when we know she doesn't like having us stay with her. Paul heard his mother say we were an incumbrance. Dulcie looked up that word in the dictionary, and it means the same thing as being a burden."

Involuntarily Miss Polly's thin fingers closed more tightly over the little hand she was holding.

"How soon is your father coming home?" she asked abruptly.

Daisy's face brightened.

"Oh, we are very happy about that," she said; "we think he may come this summer. He hasn't promised, but in his last letter he said we might see him sooner than we expected, and we expected him next winter, anyway."

"That is good news indeed," said Miss Polly, heartily, "although I suppose it will mean that I shall lose my little neighbors. By the way, won't you be leaving town for the summer before long?"

"Not till the fifteenth of June," said Daisy. "Grandma says that makes a long enough summer

for her. She doesn't enjoy the country as much as we do."

Miss Polly sighed, and glanced lovingly at her bunch of syringa.

"The country must be very beautiful just now," she said a little wistfully. "Tom wrote me the lilac-bush in his garden was in full bloom. I should love to see blooming flowers again."

"If you wheel your chair into the back room you can see our syringa-bush," suggested Daisy. "Next month there will be some roses, too, but of course a back yard isn't like the real country. Do you love the country very much, Miss Polly?"

"Oh, my dear, I love it more than words can express. I lie here thinking of it these warm days, and almost every night I dream of my little room at home. There used to be a robin's nest in the tree just outside my window. I hope the people who live in the parsonage now keep the lily bed weeded; Father was so proud of that bed."

"Your brother lives in the country, doesn't he?" Daisy asked, rather timidly.

"Yes, right on the shore of Lake Michigan. It is only half an hour by train from Chicago, but Tom says the country is lovely. I have been writing to Tom to-day, and I think it was the hardest letter I have ever had to write, because I was obliged to say something that I knew would cause him pain."

"Oh, Miss Polly, why?" cried tender-hearted

Daisy. "He's so fond of you. Did you really have to make him unhappy?"

"I am afraid so, dear, and the thought is very hard to bear. I had a letter from him yesterday, such a dear, kind letter."

"Does he want you to come and make him a visit?" inquired Daisy, in a tone of breathless interest.

Miss Polly nodded.

"He and Helen want me to come and spend the summer. This is Tom's fourth letter on the subject, and I have had two from Helen besides. I have had to make such foolish, shallow excuses, and now I am afraid Tom will be hurt, and think I don't care to come to them."

Miss Polly broke off abruptly, and hastily brushed away a tear. It was the first tear Daisy had ever seen the cheerful little invalid shed.

"Oh, dear Miss Polly," she pleaded, "please, please don't be unhappy. Why do you keep on not telling, when you know your brother loves you so much? Don't send that horrid letter. Write another one, and tell him you'll come. If you're too tired to write, I'll write for you, and you can tell me what to say. Oh, Miss Polly dear, please, please!"

But for once Miss Polly did not heed her little neighbor. She had buried her face in the pillow, and was sobbing as if her heart would break.

"It's all my pride, my foolish, wicked pride," she moaned. "I can't bear to be a burden. I cannot bear to have Tom know how I have failed. He didn't want me to come to New York by myself. We almost quarrelled about it. And all these years I have been deceiving him—letting him think I had succeeded in my plans—oh, my dear, my dear, I have done very wrong, and now I am ashamed to confess the truth."

The tears of sympathy were streaming down Daisy's own cheeks, but at these last words of Miss Polly's she could not refrain from a little gasp of astonishment.

"But you haven't failed," she cried, eagerly. "Oh, how could you possibly think you had? You're the most beautiful Christian we ever knew, and when your brother knows all about it, he'll be so proud of you he won't know what to do. We were talking about you yesterday, and Dulcie said she wished she could do something like that, just to make Papa proud of her. Oh, Miss Polly, please don't cry any more; it makes me cry too, and I'm afraid it'll bring my headache on again."

"No, no, dear, I won't," and Miss Polly made a hasty search for her handkerchief. "I am a foolish little woman to say I know, but I haven't been feeling very well lately, and I suppose things bother me more than they would otherwise. Now we are not going to talk any more about unpleasant things.

I want to hear about Paul. Have you had a letter from him lately?"

Daisy stayed for another half-hour, and Miss Polly did her best to seem cheerful, and to take an interest in all she was told, but it was easy to see the effort was a painful one, and at last the little girl rose to go, fearing she had stayed too long already. Miss Polly seemed very tired, and, contrary to her custom, did not urge her visitor to stay longer.

"Will you do something for me, dear?" she said, as Daisy bent to kiss her good-bye. "I want to get my letter to Tom posted this evening, and I am afraid it will be too late when Maggie comes home. I didn't finish writing until after she went out. It's right here on the table, all stamped and ready to go. Would it be too much trouble to take it to the letter-box at the corner?"

"Of course it wouldn't be too much trouble," said Daisy, "only—only ——" A warning glance from Miss Polly checked the impetuous words of protest, and with another kiss, she hurried away, in her hand the letter that was to carry to Tom Oliver the news that his sister "preferred spending the summer in New York."

Daisy did not take the letter at once to the post-box on the corner. On the contrary, she carried it back to the nursery, and there laid it down on the desk, where she continued to stare at it for several minutes. She was very pale, but there was a bright,

excited expression in her eyes, and her hands twitched nervously. Suddenly she went over to the bed she shared with Dulcie, and dropping down on her knees beside it, closed her eyes, and folded her hands.

"Oh, dear God," she whispered, "please forgive me if what I am going to do is very dreadful. I can't let poor Miss Polly go on being so unhappy; I am afraid she may die, and then her brother will feel so terribly to think he never knew about how brave and wonderful she's been. Please tell me if I ought to write the letter, and don't let Miss Polly be very angry with me when she knows. Amen."

For a few moments the room was very still. Then Daisy rose, and there was a look of settled determination on her face.

"I think God wants me to do it," she said, unconsciously speaking out loud. "I feel as if He was telling me I ought to do it." And, without further hesitation, she seated herself at the desk, and having selected a sheet of paper, began to write. This is what she wrote:

"DEAR MR. OLIVER:

"I hope you won't think it very queer to get a letter from a person you don't know, but I am only a little girl, and if what I am doing is wrong, will you please forgive me? I am afraid Miss Polly will be very angry at first, but perhaps she won't afterwards, because I am almost sure she would like

to have you know about everything, only she is afraid to tell you herself. She is very proud, and she doesn't want to be a burden, but she loves you better than any one in the world, and it makes her terribly unhappy to have to hurt your feelings.

"My name is Daisy Winslow, and I live next door to Miss Polly. My sisters and I go to see her very often, and she says she has told you about us. We all love her dearly, and it made us very sad when she had to sell her piano, because the bank failed. She was very brave about it, and tried to make us think she didn't mind, but we could see by her eyes that she did. She used to sing and play a great deal, and we loved hearing her. I think she was quite happy while she had her piano, even though she did have to stay in a wheel-chair all the time, and could never go out, but now she is ill, and she seems to get thinner every time we see her. I went to see her this afternoon, and she told me how you wanted her to come and spend the summer, and how she had to pretend she didn't want to. She cried about it, and it was dreadful. She is afraid that if you find out the real reason why she can't come, you will be angry because she has deceived you, but I know you won't, because she is the bravest, splendidest lady in the world, and nobody could possibly help loving her.

"I think perhaps I had better explain a little more, or you may not be able to understand. You see, when Miss Polly had that accident, three years ago, she never really got well. She has had to stay in a wheel-chair ever since, and the doctors told her she would never be able to walk again.

"I hope you won't think me interfering for writ-



DAISY TOOK THE TWO LETTERS, FLEW DOWN-STAIRS, AND OUT INTO
THE STREET.—Page 191.

ing what Miss Polly didn't want you to know, but I love her so, and she is so ill, and I just couldn't help it. Please come and see her as soon as you can, and don't let her know it even if she should be the least little bit of a burden. I am sure she couldn't be a very big one, because she is so lovely.

"If I have made a great many mistakes in this letter, please excuse them, for I am only just eleven.

"From your little friend,

"DAISY WINSLOW."

Daisy's heart was beating very fast, as she slipped her letter into an envelope, and copied the address from the other letter on the desk. She dared not read over what she had written, for fear of losing courage. It was such a terribly bold, unheard-of thing that she had done, and yet—Maggie had said Miss Polly might not live through the summer. She must get the letter posted quickly, before she had time to change her mind.

Having addressed and stamped her envelope, she took the two letters, and without even waiting to get her hat, she flew down-stairs, and out into the street. It was only a few steps to the corner where the letter-box was, and in less than five minutes from the time she left the nursery both letters had taken the first step on their journey to Chicago.

When the others returned, half an hour later, they found Daisy lying on the sofa, with her head buried in the cushions.

"Why, Daisy," exclaimed Dulcie, bending over

her sister in real anxiety, "what is it? Is your head worse?"

"It isn't my head," Daisy answered, lifting a swollen, tear-stained face from the sofa pillows; "it's—it's—oh, girls, I've done the most dreadful thing, and I'm so frightened I don't know what I shall do!"

CHAPTER XIII

DECORATION DAY

THE big Decoration Day parade has long become a thing of the past, but in the days when the Winslows were children it was looked upon as one of the principal events of year. All the State militia came to New York for the occasion, and the West Point cadets turned out in full force. For days beforehand people poured into the city, and hotels and boarding-houses were crowded to their utmost capacity. The line of march was down Fifth Avenue from Central Park to Fourteenth Street, and by eight o'clock in the morning the street was thronged with eager sightseers.

The Winslows' house was not on Fifth Avenue, and as Grandma would not allow the children to stand in the street, their only hope of seeing the big parade was the possibility that some one of Grandma's friends might invite them to her house.

"Mrs. Livingston Leroy asked us last year," Dulcie reminded her sisters. "Perhaps she may again."

"Oh, I hope she will!" cried Molly. "Maud and I couldn't go last year, and I do love to see the

soldiers, and hear the bands. Don't you hope we can go, Daisy?"

"Yes," answered Daisy, but she did not speak with much enthusiasm.

Poor Daisy was not quite her usual cheerful self in those days. She went about with such a strange, absent-minded air that Aunt Kate declared she must be half asleep, and Miss Hammond completely lost her patience, and pronounced her "a very stupid little girl." Dulcie and Molly were very gentle with her, but even they had little in the way of comfort to offer. Nearly a week had passed since the sending of that letter to Chicago, and as yet no word had been received in reply.

"I don't see how she dared do it," Molly said to Dulcie, when the two were alone together. "I wouldn't have done such a thing for the world, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't," agreed Dulcie. "And to think it should have been Daisy of all people! She never did a bold thing like that before, and she isn't nearly as likely to get into scrapes as the rest of us."

"She's afraid to go and see Miss Polly," said Molly. "She hasn't been since she sent the letter. I don't wonder she's afraid. I should be, too, if I had done such an awful thing as write and tell a lady's brother something she'd been keeping a secret from him for three years."

It was Maud who, on the evening before Decora-

tion Day, at last brought the glad tidings to the nursery that a note had come from Mrs. Livingston Leroy, inviting the whole family to watch the procession from her windows on Fifth Avenue.

"She said all the family, but Grandma says only two of us can go," finished Maud, ruefully. "Shall we have to draw lots?"

"No," said Dulcie, though her face had fallen at the news. "You and Molly must go, of course; Daisy and I went last year."

Maud gave a little skip of delight, but Molly looked grave.

"I hate doing things without you and Daisy," she said. "Don't you think Grandma may change her mind and let us all go?"

"Grandma never changes her mind," affirmed Dulcie, which was, indeed, quite true.

Mrs. Winslow told them all of the invitation, and added that she would take two of the little girls with her, but that as to taking four children out of one household, the idea was not to be considered for a moment.

"Mrs. Livingston Leroy seems to be a very kind lady," ventured Molly. "Do you think she would mind very much if we all went?"

"I should mind," returned Grandma, grimly, "and that is more to the point. You may decide among yourselves which are to go, and which remain at home."

There was nothing more to be said, and the next morning, soon after breakfast, Dulcie and Daisy watched their two younger sisters depart for the scene of festivities, accompanied by those two stern guardians, Grandma and Aunt Kate.

"What shall we do this morning?" inquired Dulcie, turning away from the parlor window with a sigh. "The nursery is being cleaned, so we can't go up there. Shall we stay here or go out on the sidewalk?"

"I don't care," said Daisy, listlessly. "Dulcie, have you any idea how long it takes for a letter to go to Chicago?"

Dulcie shook her head.

"I think it must take some time," she said, "but not nearly so long as it takes one to go to California. I wrote to Uncle Stephen nearly a month ago, and I haven't had any answer yet. I'm sure he'll answer, because I asked him that very important question, about whether he's really going to marry Miss Leslie. I asked him please to answer as soon as possible, because if he is going to marry her, we wanted to begin making the wedding presents."

"Don't letters sometimes get lost?" Daisy inquired, anxiously.

"I suppose they do, but not often. I heard that minister friend of Aunt Kate's say the United States Mail was a very remarkable institution. I think it would be rather nice to go out for a while. We

might see some of the soldiers marching up-town to join in the parade."

Daisy acquiesced languidly, and, having procured their hats, the two little girls went out to walk slowly up and down the block. It was a very hot morning, and after half an hour of this monotonous exercise, even Dulcie's spirits began to flag.

"I guess we may as well go in," she decided. "All the soldiers must be in the procession by this time, and I'd rather read than stay out here any longer. I got a very interesting book from the library yesterday. It's called 'Violet, or Through Cross to Crown.' I'll read it aloud to you if you like."

"All right," said Daisy, and accordingly they turned their steps in a homeward direction.

They had just reached their own steps when a cab drew up before the house next door, and for some unaccountable reason, Daisy's heart suddenly began to beat very fast indeed.

"Look, Dulcie," she whispered, grasping her sister's arm; "there's a gentleman getting out, and there's a lady inside, with a baby in her lap."

"Well, what of it?" inquired Dulcie in surprise. "They've probably come to see somebody in the boarding-house. You don't mean to think——" She paused in sudden excitement.

"I don't know," said Daisy, who was beginning

to tremble. "I couldn't see the gentleman's face, he went up the steps so fast, but—but it might be; it really might."

By this time they had reached the top of their own steps, and Dulcie had rung the door-bell.

"I don't see how we can possibly find out," she said, as they stood waiting for Mary to let them in. "Oh, see, he's coming down again; he must have made a mistake in the house."

Daisy leaned forward eagerly, in the hope of getting a glimpse of the stranger's face, and at that moment Mary opened the door.

"Well, ain't you coming in?" she inquired, rather impatiently, for both children appeared completely absorbed in the actions of a strange young man, who was speaking to a lady in a cab. The street was very quiet, and the little girls could hear every word he said.

"It's that house," the young man was saying, and as he spoke, he glanced directly up at the Winslows' front door. "Will you get out, or shall I make some inquiries first?"

"We may as well all get out," the lady answered, and the next moment the baby had been transferred from its mother to its father, and a very pretty bright-faced young woman had stepped out of the cab.

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded Mary, still more impatiently. "If you don't want to come

in, what did you bring me all the way down-stairs to answer the bell for? ”

“ They’re coming up here,” gasped Daisy, “ and it is—oh, Dulcie, I’m sure it is.”

“ Is the name of one of these little girls Daisy Winslow? ” inquired the young man, as he came up the steps, and though his voice was kind, and his face very pleasant, Daisy shrank behind her sister, in a fit of uncontrollable shyness and embarrassment. So it was Dulcie who answered the question.

“ Yes, sir,” she faltered, “ that is, at least—I am Dulcie Winslow. Do you want to speak to my sister Daisy? ”

“ I do very much indeed. May we come in? My name is Oliver, and I think you know my sister, who lives next door.”

Just how it all happened Dulcie and Daisy could never clearly recall, but in a very short space of time, they had gone into the house, passed the astonished Mary, and were seated in the parlor; the baby, once more restored to her mother’s lap, gazing about her, with an air of serene content, and uttering little crows and gurgles of satisfaction. Daisy’s first impulse had been to escape, but on second thought she decided that it would be cowardly to leave Dulcie alone, to take the consequences of whatever might be in store for them, so she stayed where she was, and, after all, there was nothing

very alarming in the young man's few words of explanation.

"I received a letter a few days ago," he began, as soon as they were all seated, and Mary, still very much puzzled, and not at all sure of the wisdom of admitting strangers in the absence of Mrs. Winslow and her daughter, had closed the front door. "It was signed Daisy Winslow, and the writer said she was a little girl who lived next door to my sister Miss Oliver."

"I wrote it," said Daisy, desperately. "Are you Miss Polly's brother?"

"Yes, I am," the young man answered, and he held out his hand with such a kind, friendly smile, that all Daisy's fears melted away on the instant.

"I want to thank you for telling me what you did in that letter, but I must ask a few more questions before seeing my sister. That is why we came here first. This is my wife, Mrs. Oliver."

"Oh, I'm so glad you've brought her," cried Daisy, joyfully, "and the baby, too. Miss Polly will be so happy to see you all. She's got your pictures, and she's told us so much about you, and—and—oh, I am so glad, so glad!" Suddenly Daisy's over-strained nerves gave way, and she began to cry.

It was Mrs. Oliver who drew the trembling child down beside her on the sofa, and soothed and comforted her while her husband questioned Dulcie. The letter had been a great shock to him, he said;

he had never dreamed that his sister was not perfectly well. Could Dulcie give him any particulars of the case? And Dulcie, only too glad to tell him dear Miss Polly's story, told all she knew of the little cripple's courage and unselfishness. The story lost nothing in the telling, and before it was finished Mrs. Oliver was crying softly, and there were tears in her husband's eyes as well.

"She's the dearest, loveliest person," finished Dulcie, with a catch in her voice, and Daisy added pleadingly:

"You're not angry with her, are you, Mr. Oliver?"

"Angry," repeated Miss Polly's brother huskily, "no, indeed, how could I be? God bless her. It has been a wretched mistake, that's all, and I am very much to blame for not having come to see her long before this, and found out for myself how matters were. I think we can go now, Helen; there doesn't seem to be any more to hear."

But Mrs. Oliver looked a little doubtful.

"Don't you think she ought to be prepared first?" she suggested. "The shock of seeing us so unexpectedly might be bad for her, if she is not strong."

"Perhaps you are right," Tom Oliver admitted. "I was so anxious to see the dear little woman that for the moment I forgot everything else. We had better see Miss Collins, and get her to break the news."

"Miss Collins has gone away," said Dulcie. "Her sister was ill, and she went to take care of her. A Mrs. Brown is keeping the house while she's away, and I don't think she knows Miss Polly very well."

Mr. Oliver looked a good deal perplexed.

"What shall we do?" he inquired of his wife. "I suppose we had better see this Mrs. Brown, at any rate."

Mrs. Oliver glanced doubtfully from her husband to the two little girls.

"Do you think you could do it?" she asked. "You have both been very kind to Miss Polly, and I know she loves you."

"I think we could," said Dulcie. "I've read about breaking news to people, and I know you mustn't do it too suddenly. Oh, Mrs. Oliver, may Daisy and I tell Miss Polly?"

"I think you may," said Mrs. Oliver, smiling. "I am sure they can be trusted, Tom."

Mr. Oliver nodded, and they all rose. It was then that Mary, who had remained in the background, an interested spectator of the whole scene, stepped forward with a word of protest.

"Where are you all going?" she inquired, suspiciously. "You children can't go running off with people you don't know. Your grandma would be very angry."

"We're only going next door to see Mr. Oliver's

sister," Dulcie explained. "We know her very well, and we often go to see her, so it's all right." And without further explanation, she pushed past the still unconvinced Mary, and two minutes later was ringing the door-bell of the boarding-house next door.

The door was opened by a maid, who looked more than a little surprised at the sight of so many visitors, but when Mr. Oliver gave his name, and added that he had come to see his sister, the woman's face brightened perceptibly.

"The Lord be praised!" she ejaculated. "Miss Polly'll be that glad to see you. I'll run right up, and tell her you're here." She was already half-way up the first flight of stairs, when Mr. Oliver called her back.

"I think we will let these little girls go up first," he said. "I am afraid the shock of seeing us without any preparation might be too much for my sister. I hear she has not been well lately."

Maggie—for it was the faithful Maggie—looked rather disappointed, but was forced to submit. And then Daisy had an inspiration.

"Couldn't we take the baby?" she asked, eagerly, appealing to Mrs. Oliver. "Miss Polly loves babies. One of the boarders brought her little nephew to see her once, and she enjoyed it so much. We wouldn't tell her whose baby it was, just at first,

you know. It would be just like doing a thing in a book."

Mrs. Oliver glanced at her husband.

"I think baby would be good," she said, "but how about carrying her up-stairs?"

"I'll tell you what you might do," broke in Maggie, who was almost as much excited as the children themselves. "The room next Miss Polly's is vacant just now. You might all come up, and you and the gentleman wait there, while the children take the baby in."

This suggestion was eagerly adopted, and the whole party proceeded up-stairs. As they climbed flight after flight, the little girls noticed that Miss Polly's brother grew very grave and silent, and when they reached the top floor, he gave the baby to Dulcie, without a word. There was a moment of breathless anxiety lest baby Oliver should spoil everything by beginning to cry, but she was—as her mother frequently informed her friends—a remarkably amiable child and although she looked a little surprised at being transferred from her father's arms to those of a stranger, she made no protest, and the next moment had seized one of Dulcie's long braids, with a crow of delight.

How the children's hearts beat, as they knocked at Miss Polly's door, and turned the handle, in answer to her gentle "Come in." The invalid was not in bed, but in her wheel-chair, engaged in

darning stockings, but at sight of her little visitors, and the baby in Dulcie's arms, she dropped her stocking, with a little cry of surprise and pleasure.

"A baby! how adorable! Oh, my dears, where did it come from? Whose baby is it?"

"She belongs to some people we know," faltered Dulcie. "We asked if we might bring her to see you. We knew you loved babies."

"Indeed I do love them. What a little beauty. Do you think she would be frightened if you gave her to me, just for a minute?"

"I don't think she would," said Dulcie; "she let me take her, and she doesn't seem shy."

Miss Polly held out her arms, and Dulcie put the smiling, crowing baby into them, and with a little cooing sound the invalid cuddled the child to her heart.

"Oh, the darling," she murmured, "the precious little darling! That's right, put your head down on my shoulder. You know I love babies, don't you? What is her name, Dulcie?"

"Her name is—is Mary," gasped Dulcie, who was finding considerable difficulty in keeping the tremor out of her voice.

"Mary," repeated Miss Polly, softly; "that is my little niece's name, but they call her Polly."

"They call this one Polly, too," said Daisy, coming to her sister's relief, "at least we think they do.

We don't know her father and mother very well. We never saw them till this morning."

Daisy was very much embarrassed, but Miss Polly was too much absorbed in the baby to notice anything unusual in her manner.

"Look at her dimples," she cried, admiringly, "and her hair is going to curl beautifully when she is a little older."

"She likes you; she's patting your cheek," cried Daisy, joyfully. "Oh, Miss Polly dear, wouldn't you love to have her all the time—to live in the same house, I mean?"

Miss Polly smiled rather sadly.

"I should never be lonely," she said, "but I am afraid I shouldn't be of much use. What should I do if the baby cried and wanted something to eat?"

"Oh, but her mother would be there to take care of her," explained Daisy. "She's got such a pretty mother, Miss Polly. I'm quite sure you would love the baby's mother."

"I am sure I should," Miss Polly agreed. "Perhaps you will bring her to see me some time. Is she visiting you?"

"No," said Daisy, "she's—she's come to see somebody who lives in this house. The baby's father has come too. They stopped at our house first, because they wanted to ask some questions about—about the lady they've come to see. Oh,

Miss Polly dear, please don't look so white and queer; you—you scare us."

It was true that Miss Polly had grown very white, but there was a wonderful light in her eyes, and she held the baby tight.

"Where are they?" she questioned tremulously. "I think I am beginning to understand, but, oh, my dears, how ——"

Miss Polly did not finish her sentence, for at that moment Dulcie—who had been standing by the door—suddenly threw it open.

"It's all right, Mr. Oliver," she cried. "Miss Polly has guessed who you are, and she loves the baby." And without waiting for anything more, she darted away, closely followed by Daisy.

Maggie was waiting for them in the lower hall, ready to ask innumerable questions, but she waited in vain, and when, at the end of half an hour, she ventured up-stairs, to listen outside Miss Polly's door, there was no sound of children's voices to be heard. There were other voices, though; Miss Polly's with a ring of gladness in it that Maggie had never heard before, and her brother's, low and full of tenderness. The pretty sister-in-law spoke, too, and once the baby crowed, but where were the children? Maggie was so puzzled that at last she could not endure the suspense any longer, and knocked softly at the closed door.

"Excuse me, Miss Polly," she apologized, when

Mr. Oliver had opened the door, "but can you tell me where the little girls from next door are?"

"They must have gone home," Miss Polly answered. "They left here some time ago."

"They never came down-stairs," Maggie objected. "I've been waiting in the front hall all the time. I think they must be hiding somewhere."

Miss Polly laughed her old merry laugh, that nobody in the boarding-house had heard in months.

"They are not hiding," she said. "They have probably gone home through the mysterious door in the wall."

Dulcie and Daisy were very happy as they made their way, for the last time, through the familiar housemaid's closet, to their own trunk-room, but their troubles were not yet over. In the excitement of the moment they had quite forgotten the important fact that Mary was cleaning the nursery. Now it happened that at the very moment when the two little figures emerged from the trunk-room, Mary had gone out into the hall, and the sight that met her eyes was so astonishing that, as she afterwards expressed it to Bridget, "she nearly dropped down stone dead on the spot." Explanations followed, and Mary was made acquainted with the famous door in the wall.

"Grandpa had it cut through when his brother lived here," Dulcie explained. "They were both writers, and they had their studies up here on the

top floor. The door was so they could go from one study to the other without having to go down-stairs. We've known about it for a long time, but we couldn't tell, because we were afraid Grandma would fasten it, and then we couldn't go to see poor Miss Polly. But now we don't care whether Grandma fastens the door or not, because of course Miss Polly's brother will take her home with him, and we won't want to go in next door any more."

Mary looked down thoughtfully at the two flushed little faces.

"If Mrs. Winslow finds out there'll be a fuss," she remarked. "Maybe I can fasten the door myself; I see there's a bolt."

"You mean you won't tell Grandma?" cried Dulcie, scarcely able to believe in their good fortune.

Mary did not answer, but going to the door, she seized the heavy bolt, and with one turn of her strong fingers, fastened it securely.

"There," she said, "I guess that's safe enough. Nobody can get in here from the other side, anyway. I can't see there's any call to say any more about it. I've heard of that poor lady next door, and I guess it's a good thing you went to cheer her up once in a while. I'm glad her brother's come to look after her."

So Grandma was not told of the door that had remained unfastened for so many years, and when Molly and Maud returned, they were regaled with

such a wonderfully exciting story of the morning's happenings, as fairly took away their breath, and caused them to almost forget to describe the parade.

"It's just exactly like a book thing," Molly declared, "breaking the news to Miss Polly and all, but I wish you hadn't run away so quick. It would be so interesting to know what they all did."

Daisy blushed.

"We couldn't have stayed," she said. "It was all so sort of solemn, you know, and beautiful. Perhaps we can go in again this afternoon—not through the door in the wall, that's bolted—but when we are out for our walk. We can find out how Miss Polly is then, and you must see that adorable baby."

When the four little girls presented themselves at the invalid's door that afternoon, they found a very different Miss Polly from the one they had left a few hours earlier. There was a bright color in her cheeks, and a light in the eyes that had looked so sad and wistful of late. Miss Polly was alone, for her brother and sister-in-law had gone away to the hotel, where they were to pass the night.

"Tom is coming to see me again this evening," she told them, and in her voice was a ring of wonderful new happiness. "Oh, children, I can't help feeling as if it must be a dream, and that I shall wake up after a while. I have dreamed of this before, but I never believed it would come true."

"Then—then you're not very angry," whispered

Daisy, nestling close to her friend. "I was so afraid you would never forgive me for writing that letter. Dulcie and Molly thought I ought not to have done it, but, oh, Miss Polly dear, I couldn't help it. You were so unhappy that day, and you said it was your pride, and—and ——"

"My dear little girl," interrupted Miss Polly, putting her arm round her tenderly, "I couldn't possibly be angry with any one to-day, much less with some one who has been the means of bringing me this great joy. I would not advise you to make a practice of trying to arrange your friends' affairs, but in this case it has turned out all right."

Daisy grew scarlet, and hid her burning face on Miss Polly's shoulder.

"I'll never do such a thing again," she promised. "Oh, Miss Polly, I've been so worried ever since I wrote that letter. It was such a relief when your brother came, and I knew he wasn't going to be angry."

"No, dear, he wasn't angry," Miss Polly answered softly. "It is all very wonderful. Think of it, children, Tom and Helen really want me to come and live with them. Helen came all the way from Chicago with Tom, to tell me herself how much she wanted me. Tom can't be away long, so we are starting the day after to-morrow. Miss Collins will be back to-night, and I know she will understand, and be glad."

Dulcie sighed.

"We shall miss you very much," she said, "but we can write to each other, and it will be lovely to think of you in that pretty little house you used to tell us about. Papa is coming home soon, and he says we are to have a home of our own, just as we had before Mamma died, so perhaps we won't be here next winter either."

"I am so glad," said Miss Polly. "I shall never forget my dear little neighbors, and all they did to make me happy." She laid her hand lovingly on Daisy's head as she spoke.

"Grandma never found out about the door," said Molly, "and now it's bolted, so nobody can use it any more. We wrote Papa about it, but we haven't had any answer yet; it takes such a long time for a letter to come from China. Miss Leslie thought it was all right, though. I wish you could know Miss Leslie, she's so sweet and dear. We tell her about everything, and she answers all our letters. We hope she's going to marry Uncle Stephen, but we're not sure. Dulcie's written to ask him, but he hasn't answered yet."

Miss Polly smiled.

"You all seem very fond of writing letters," she said. "I hope you will write to me often, for I shall be interested in everything you do."

"I think this has been one of the happiest days we ever had," remarked Dulcie, that evening,

when they were all in the nursery, preparing for bed.

"It's been lovely," agreed Daisy, "but there's going to be a happier one still, and that will be the day Papa comes home. I wish we could tell Lizzie about everything, she'd be so interested, and perhaps we shall see her when we go to the country, for Mary says her husband keeps the grocery store at Glenwood, and that's only five miles from us."

"And just think, Grandma and Aunt Kate never even heard of Miss Polly," reflected Molly. "They might be just as happy as we are to-night, if they only took a little interest in other things besides missionaries."

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. WINSLOW GETS A TELEGRAM

IT was a glorious morning towards the end of June, and the four little Winslows were comfortably established under the big apple-tree. The Winslow Homestead was on the banks of the Hudson, and from where they sat, the children could watch the boats on the river, and even hear the sound of the paddles, as the big excursion steamers plied their busy way between New York and Albany. They could look across to the opposite shore, where the Palisades rose in forms like castles, from the very brink of the river. It was a beautiful view, and the children loved it, as their father had loved it before them. The place had been in the Winslow family for three generations, and old Dr. Winslow himself had climbed that very apple-tree when a boy, and brought down many a shower of half-ripe apples for his younger brothers and sisters. Dulcie and Daisy had never wearied of their father's stories of his boyhood at the old homestead on the Hudson, and the two weeks since the family had left the city had been very pleasant ones.

"I don't know why it is, but Grandma always seems rather nicer in summer than she does in winter," Molly had remarked only that morning. "She doesn't scold half so much, and she lets us do pretty nearly everything we want to."

"I think it's because there's so much more room," Dulcie decided. "We are not so much in her way. I think the less Grandma sees of us, the better she likes us."

"Perhaps it's because Papa's coming home soon, and she knows she isn't going to have us much longer," Daisy suggested. "She says I may help pack the next missionary box. I love to see what they send to the missionaries, only I wish some of the ladies wouldn't send quite such shabby things. I don't see how any missionary could possibly use them."

But at this particular moment the little girls were not thinking of Grandma or of missionaries either, for Dulcie was reading "A Peep Behind the Scenes" aloud, and for the past hour they had all been completely absorbed in the story.

"It's very sad," remarked Dulcie, pausing at the conclusion of a chapter to wipe her eyes. "I wish something horrid would happen to that stepmother, and Rosalie would hurry and find her Aunt Lucy."

"Stepmothers must be awful," said Molly, glancing up from the tea-cozy she was crocheting. "Almost every one we've read about is cruel."

"They are all cruel," announced Dulcie, in a tone of conviction. "Let's look at your book-mark, Maud. Oh, you are getting all the stitches crooked. Give it to me, and let me straighten it out for you."

Maud relinquished her work quite readily, and threw herself back in the soft grass.

"It's the first one I ever made," she said. "I don't believe Miss Leslie will mind even if it is just a little bit crooked. It's a wedding present, anyhow, and people ought not to criticize presents."

"Your tea-cozy is going to be lovely," said Daisy, regarding Molly's work admiringly. "I'm afraid my pincushion won't be half as pretty."

"Oh, yes, it will," Molly assured her. "Lizzie always said you sewed better than any of us. I'm sure Miss Leslie will love your cushion, and Uncle Stephen, too. Don't you want one of us to read, Dulcie, while you work on your tidy?"

Dulcie hesitated.

"I think I'd rather go on reading," she said. "I can read faster than the rest of you, and it's so interesting about Rosalie and her stepmother. There really isn't any hurry about finishing our presents. We don't even know when the wedding is to be."

"I wish Uncle Stephen had told us more about it," said Daisy. "It would be so interesting to think of them on their wedding day, but he only said he was sure Miss Leslie would like some wed-

ding presents, and we could give them to her when we saw her. He didn't even say he was going to marry her himself."

"Of course he is, though," said Dulcie, "or else he would have told us we were mistaken. Perhaps they are coming east on their wedding trip. Won't it be nice to see them again, and to be able to call Miss Leslie 'Aunt Florence'? I don't believe Grandma will ask them here for a visit, but perhaps they'll have us come and spend the day at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. I guess Grandma would let us if Uncle Stephen came for us. It's only an hour on the train."

"It would be so lovely that I don't believe it will ever happen," said Dulcie, sceptically. "I'm very sorry, Maudie, but I'm afraid I shall have to rip this all out and start over again."

"I don't mind," said Maud, with unruffled composure. "I think perhaps Miss Leslie would like it just as much if I wrote a nice piece of poetry for her wedding present."

This suggestion was greeted by a peal of laughter from the other three, but Maud remained quite grave.

"I made up one this morning in bed," she said. "I think it's rather pretty."

"Let's hear it," said Dulcie, and Maud, nothing loth, sat up on the grass and began to recite in a very sing-song tone:

“ Oh, the little birds are singing.
Oh, the little flowers are blooming.
Oh, the little calves are happy.
Oh, the little ——

I can't remember the rest, but don't you think it's nice poetry? ”

“ It isn't bad, considering your age,” said Dulcie, indulgently, and Molly added, with real admiration:

“ It doesn't exactly rhyme, but it sounds a little like ‘ Hiawatha. ’ ”

“ I think I shall be a poet like Mr. Longfellow when I grow up,” announced Maud, “ and all my poems will be about the country, because I love it so much. Miss Polly loves the country, too. Her letter made me feel so nice and comfortable inside.”

“ It's lovely to think of Miss Polly being so happy,” said Daisy. “ I can't ever feel sorry I wrote that letter to her brother, though I don't believe I should ever dare do such a thing again.”

“ I'm so glad it's only June,” reflected Molly, “ and we can stay here till September. It's so much pleasanter than being in New York, especially now that Miss Polly's gone away.”

“ I should like to be going to Europe with Aunt Julia and Paul,” said Dulcie. “ It must be wonderful to see different countries, and all the places you've read about in history.”

“ Paul doesn't care about that part of it,” said

Molly, and taking from her pocket a crumpled letter, she read aloud:

"It will be fun on the ship, and Father says I can go to the zoo in London, but Mother says travelling all summer will be as good as studying history, and I always hated history worse than all the other lessons, so I don't believe I shall like Europe much, and I wish we were going to Nahant instead."

"People don't always appreciate their advantages, as Miss Hammond says," quoted Dulcie. "If I were in Paul's place, I should want to see every single thing I possibly could. Oh, here comes the telegraph boy. I wonder what's happened."

Dulcie's tone had changed to one of excitement, not unmingled with anxiety. The arrival of a telegram was rather an unusual event in the Winslow family, and Dulcie and Maud both sprang to their feet, and ran to meet the small boy from the village, who was seen crossing the lawn, with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"It's for Grandma," announced Dulcie, when she had taken the envelope from the messenger. "I'll take it in to her. The boy says there's ten cents to collect."

Mrs. Winslow was in the kitchen, superintending the putting up of strawberry jam. She was in the midst of delivering a lecture to Bridget when Dulcie, flushed and panting, appeared in the doorway.

"A telegram for you, Grandma," she said, "and the boy says there's ten cents to collect."

Grandma turned a trifle pale as she held out her hand for the envelope. Her thoughts instantly flew to a possible accident in the Chester family, or to her daughter Kate, who had gone away for a week's visit to a friend. But her manner was apparently as composed as usual, as she took out her purse, and counted the change.

"He will have to change a quarter," she said.

Dulcie hurried away, glad of the excuse to return with the change, and possibly learn the contents of the telegram. There was a strong probability that she would not be told, however, for Grandma and Aunt Kate were always silent about their affairs. She paid the messenger, received the correct change, and was on her way back to the kitchen, when she encountered her three younger sisters.

"It was so exciting, we couldn't wait any longer," Molly explained. "What did Grandma say when she opened it?"

"She hadn't opened it when she sent me away," said Dulcie, "but I've got to go back with the change, and perhaps she'll tell me."

"We'll come with you," said Daisy, "but we'll wait outside, so as not to seem too curious. If Grandma thought we were curious she wouldn't tell us anything."

Accordingly, only Dulcie entered the kitchen,

while the other three remained discretely in the background. Mrs. Winslow had evidently read her message, for the telegram was nowhere to be seen, and she was talking to Bridget, who looked as if she had heard something interesting. At Dulcie's entrance, however, Grandma broke off abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

"Here's the change, Grandma," said the little girl, "and—and I hope it isn't any bad news."

"No," said Mrs. Winslow, with a rather grim smile; "I don't imagine you will consider it bad news. The telegram was from your father, and it was sent from Chicago. I have known for some time that he was on his way home, but thought best not to tell you sooner. You children get so excited over things, and you know how much I dislike a fuss."

"I'm rather glad Grandma didn't tell us sooner," remarked Dulcie, with a happy laugh. "I really don't see how we could have lived if we had known Papa was on his way home, and not know how soon he would get here. Oh, girls, isn't it the most glorious thing that ever happened?"

It was afternoon, and the four little sisters were once more in their favorite place, under the big apple-tree. The first excitement of Grandma's wonderful news had, in a measure, subsided, but for the first few hours it had really seemed quite impossible to keep still, and at last Grandma, in despair, had

gone out to call on a neighbor, declaring that so much talking was more than she could endure. But in spite of her sharp words, Mrs. Winslow had not looked altogether displeased.

"I think she is a little happy herself," Daisy said, as the tall erect figure of the old lady passed out of the gate. "Of course when Papa comes she won't have to keep us any longer, and that will be a great relief."

"I don't think we've been such a terrible trouble to her," said Molly, a little indignantly; "we've tried to be pretty good."

"Yes, I know," said Daisy, "but then, you see, Grandma doesn't care much about children, and we are only steps. If it had been Paul it might be different."

"Oh, I'm so glad we're not going to be steps any longer," cried Dulcie, with shining eyes. "Think of having a little home all by ourselves with Papa. I'm so happy I don't know whether I want to laugh or cry."

"Do you suppose Papa will let you keep house?" inquired Molly. "You're twelve."

"He might," admitted Dulcie, with becoming modesty. "I think I could, but I shouldn't scold the servants as much as Grandma does. I wonder where our home will be."

"I hope it will be in the country," said Maud. "Maybe I can have rabbits."

"I don't care where it is," said Daisy; "I don't care about anything but seeing Papa. I suppose he didn't tell us he was coming so soon because he wanted it to be a surprise."

"Of course that was the reason," agreed Dulcie, confidently. "It would have been a surprise, too, if we hadn't happened to take in the telegram. I don't believe Grandma would have told us anything, but then we wouldn't have had the pleasure of anticipating. I think to anticipate something pleasant is one of the nicest things, if you don't have to wait too long."

"The telegram was from Chicago," said Daisy. "Grandma says Papa may get here to-morrow."

"I'm hungry," announced Maud, somewhat irrelevantly. "I was so excited about Papa's coming home I couldn't eat any dinner. I don't see how I can possibly wait till tea-time."

"I think we are all a little hungry," said Dulcie. "I know I was too excited to eat much dinner. Grandma doesn't like to have us eat between meals, but I don't believe she'd mind our having a little bread and butter to-day."

"Go and ask Bridget for some," urged Molly. "She generally gives you what you ask for, and she's called you Miss Dulcie since you were twelve."

"Ask her to put some brown sugar on it," charged

Maud, as Dulcie rose, and walked away in the direction of the house.

As she approached the back premises, Dulcie noticed that a horse and buggy were standing outside the kitchen door. The buggy was empty, and the horse was fastened to the hitching-post. It was also evident from the sound of voices in the kitchen that Bridget was entertaining visitors. Dulcie paused a moment before going in, and as she did so, some words fell upon her ears, which set her heart beating so fast that she could scarcely breathe.

"It was the madam herself told me," Bridget was saying. "She read out the message, and then she says, 'the children don't know a thing about it,' she says, 'and he wants it kept from them till he can tell them himself.'"

"It's just too awful, that's what it is!" cried another voice. "I never thought he'd do it, him such a nice, kind gentleman, and so fond of the first one, too. Oh, the poor lambs; the poor lambs!"

Dulcie knew that voice, although it was many months since she had heard it last. Impulsively she hurried forward, regardless of the fact that there were several persons in the kitchen, including a strange young man, with freckles, and very red hair, and in another moment her arms were round the neck of a stout, pleasant-faced young woman, and

she was hugging her tight, and laughing and crying both together.

The young woman returned Dulcie's embrace heartily, and at the same time began to cry.

"Oh, my precious!" she cried, "I couldn't keep away another minute, I just couldn't. I heard you'd moved up for the summer, and I said to Michael—that's my husband, dear—I said 'you've got to drive me over to the old place this afternoon. I've got to see those precious children,' I said. I didn't think your grandma'd have any objections, seeing as I'm married, and couldn't come back even if she'd have me, but O dear, O dear! I never thought to hear such dreadful news." And the young woman—who was a very emotional person—began to sob more violently than ever.

"But there isn't any dreadful news, Lizzie; I don't know what you mean," faltered Dulcie, who was still clinging round her old nurse's neck. "Papa is coming home. Grandma had a telegram from him this morning, and he may be home to-morrow."

"Yes, yes, my darling, I know all about it, but how is he coming home, that's the question? How is he coming home to the dear little trusting children who love him so much?"

"Lizzie, what is it?" cried Dulcie, in sudden terror; "has something terrible happened to Papa, that we don't know about? Is he ill?"

"No, no, dearie, he's well enough, I guess, but—do stop making signs to me, Bridget; there's no reason why she shouldn't be told. They've all got to know soon."

"Know what?" questioned Dulcie, gazing with big frightened eyes from one face to another. "Something has happened to Papa, I know it has, and nobody will tell us. Oh! oh!" And Dulcie burst into tears, and hid her face on Lizzie's shoulder.

"There, there, Miss Dulcie, don't take on so," soothed Bridget. "Nothing so very bad has happened. Lizzie always makes a fuss over things. She don't know what she's saying."

"I don't, don't I?" retorted the indignant Lizzie, "and who should know better, I'd like to ask? Didn't I have one myself, and isn't that the reason I ran away from home at sixteen, and have been working for my living ever since? I guess if anybody in this world knows about stepmothers I do."

"Stepmothers!" repeated Dulcie, lifting her face, from which the color had suddenly faded. "Lizzie, is somebody going to have a stepmother?"

"You are, my lamb," sobbed Lizzie, and the words were accompanied by a convulsive hug. "Your papa is bringing her home to you. He was married in California last week. Your grandma's known it was going to happen ever since last winter, but it was your papa's wish you shouldn't be told

till he came home and told you himself. Oh, my poor baby, don't cry so, don't now. It's an awful thing, I know, and my heart's just breaking for you all, but it can't be helped, and you've got to make the best of it."

CHAPTER XV

DULCIE TAKES THE HELM

“Daisy, are you asleep?”

“No,” said Daisy, in a smothered voice, lifting a flushed, tear-wet face from the pillow. “I’ve tried and tried, but my eyes won’t stay shut. I thought you might be asleep, though, so I kept as quiet as I could.”

Dulcie sighed, and slipped an arm round her sister.

“I can’t go to sleep either,” she whispered; “I don’t believe I’ve been asleep at all. I’ve been thinking and thinking, till it seemed as if my head would just burst. I’m so glad you’re awake, for I must talk to somebody. We must whisper, though, so as not to wake Molly and Maud.”

“I think it must be the middle of the night,” whispered Daisy. “It seems ages since I heard Grandma lock her door. Oh, Dulcie, hasn’t it been a dreadful day? I’ve been thinking about step-mothers ever since I went to bed. Do you suppose real ones are all as dreadful as the ones in books?”

“I’m afraid they are,” sighed Dulcie. “They may not all be wicked. Grandma isn’t wicked, but

I don't believe she ever made Papa very happy when he was a little boy. I don't believe Papa would marry a lady who was really cruel, but even if she isn't, she won't want us. We shall be the same bother to her we've been to Grandma. That's the dreadful part of it. Oh, how could Papa have done it? He knew we would always stay with him, and take care of him." Dulcie's voice broke in a sudden sob.

It had, indeed, been a very sad evening for the four little girls. They had spent it alone, for Grandma had not come home to tea. She had sent a note to say the children were not to wait for her, as she had accepted the invitation of a neighbor to remain to supper, and go to hear a distinguished speaker at the town hall. As for Lizzie, chief cause of all the trouble, she had been driven home by her husband, a very sad and depressed Lizzie, for every one had blamed her for telling the children a piece of news which Mrs. Winslow had strictly forbidden every member of the household to mention. So the children had sat on the piazza in the twilight, after tea, Molly and Maud with their heads on their elder sisters' laps, and nobody had talked much. There really did not seem anything to say, and it had been a relief to them all when bedtime came. They had undressed in the same quiet, subdued way, and Molly and Maud had soon forgotten their troubles in sleep.

Dulcie cried softly into the pillow for a few minutes, while Daisy soothed and comforted her as best she could, both of them still mindful of their sleeping sisters in the other bed, for, as in the city, the four little girls shared the same room. Then Dulcie pulled herself together again, and began to talk.

"I've been thinking of it for hours and hours," she whispered, "and I've made up my mind we've got to do something."

Daisy gasped.

"There isn't anything we can do," she protested. "We've just got to make the best of it. I've been praying a lot, Dulcie dear, and I think perhaps God won't let the stepmother be so very dreadful, after all. There may be some nice stepmothers, you know, even if we've never heard of them."

"But there is something we can do," said Dulcie, not without a touch of pride in her tone. "I've thought of it. You see, it isn't as if we were all little as we were when Mamma died. Then, of course, we couldn't do anything for ourselves, and Papa had to bring us to Grandma, but now you and I are old enough to earn our living, and even Molly could work—wash dishes, you know, and shell peas, and little things like that. Between the three of us we ought to be able to earn enough to take care of Maud."

"Earn our own living!" repeated Daisy, incredulously. "Why, Dulcie, how could we? Papa

wouldn't let us, or Grandma either. Grandma would say we had disgraced the family, the same as she did when that cousin of hers went away to be an actress."

Dulcie sniffed scornfully.

"We can't help what Grandma says," she said. "Papa won't think we are a disgrace to the family. Besides, it will all have to happen before he gets home. He may not like it just at first, but I don't believe he'll really mind much, because, of course, it will make the stepmother happy not to have any burdens."

"But—but," faltered Daisy, "Papa is coming home to-morrow. How can it possibly happen before that?"

"Because it's got to," said Dulcie, firmly. "I've thought it all out, lying here, and it's really quite a wonderful plan. Now listen, and don't interrupt till I get through. We won't tell the others anything till morning, but we'll have to get up very early, so as to be away before anybody else is awake. We'll dress very quietly, and just slip out of the house without anybody's knowing a thing about it. There's an old leather bag in the storeroom that I don't believe Grandma would mind our taking, and we can put a few things in it—just necessary things, you know, like combs and tooth-brushes, and a set of clean clothes for each of us. We'll walk to the station, and take the first train going up the river.

Isn't it wonderful that Uncle Stephen should have sent us that five dollars for the Fourth of July? I thought we could keep it to buy real birthday presents for Molly and Maud, but we'll have to spend it this way. We'll buy four tickets for Peak's Point. It's twenty miles off, and nobody knows us there. Papa took me there once on the boat, and I remember it was quite a big place, and there were some lovely houses. We'll stop at the first house we like the looks of, and ring the door-bell and ask for work. Of course they may not want us at the first one, but we'll keep right on asking till we find some one who wants some little girls to help with the housework. People often do take little girls, you know. You remember the girl who used to take the Van Arsdale baby out; I'm sure she wasn't much older than I am. We won't give our real names; people in books never give their real names when they run away from home. Don't you think it's a wonderful plan?"

"No, I don't," declared Daisy. "I think it's the most awful thing I ever heard of in my life. I'm sure Papa would be very angry. It would be dreadful not to be here when he gets home to-morrow."

Dulcie caught her breath in a quickly suppressed sob.

"I know it," she choked, "and I feel dreadfully about it, but it can't be helped. It isn't as if Papa were coming alone, you know; the stepmother will

be here, too. I promised Mamma to take care of you all, and I've always known a stepmother was the very worst kind of a 'step' there was. Besides, when Papa finds out we're supporting ourselves, and making money, I think he'll be rather proud of us. We'll leave a note, of course—people in books always leave notes—and when we are settled, we'll let people know where we are. We've got to do something, Daisy, we really have. We can't go on being burdens, and incum—I can't remember the rest of the word, but you know what Paul told us he heard his mother say we were. It's a dreadful thing to feel you are a burden, and I just can't bear it any longer." And Dulcie burst into such a passionate fit of crying that poor, trembling Daisy was at her wits' end to comfort her.

It was a long time before either child closed her eyes that night. They talked in whispers, or rather Dulcie talked, for it was she who made all the plans, while Daisy merely listened, and murmured faint, frightened little protests. The whole scheme appeared to her so utterly preposterous and impossible that at first she thought Dulcie was making up one of her famous stories, but Dulcie's was the stronger nature of the two, and in the end she had her way, as she generally did with her younger sisters. But poor little Daisy's heart was very heavy. Long after Dulcie had fallen asleep, worn out by excitement, she lay with wide open eyes, staring into the

darkness, until tears would not be kept back any longer, and then she cried herself to sleep.

Almost as soon as the first streaks of sunlight had made their way through the closed blinds, and while the birds were still singing their morning chorus, Dulcie was wide awake again, ready for the day's work. She lay still for a few minutes, listening to the breathing of her sleeping sisters, and then rose softly, and seating herself at the desk, began to write. She wrote steadily for the next ten minutes, and then paused, arrested by a slight rustle from the bed she had left. Daisy was sitting up, watching her anxiously, her blue eyes full of trouble.

"What are you doing?" she inquired, in a tremulous whisper.

"Writing that letter to Papa," Dulcie answered. "I'm just finishing. You can read what I've written, if you want to. I think it's rather nice."

Daisy slipped out of bed and tiptoed softly across the room to her sister's side. Leaning over Dulcie's shoulder, she read:

"DARLING, PRECIOUS PAPA:

"You will find this letter when you come, and it will explain why we are not here to welcome you. We are terribly, terribly sorry not to be here, but if we waited to tell you our plan, we are afraid perhaps you would not let us go away at all. Oh, dear Papa, please don't be angry with us. I am sure you wouldn't be if you knew how very unhappy we are. We don't blame you for marrying the step-

mother, because Daisy says you may have been very lonely. We hope you will be very happy, but we don't want to stay and be burdens. It was bad enough to be burdens to Grandma, but it would be much worse to be them to a stepmother. So we are going away to earn our living. Daisy and I can both sweep and dust very well, and Daisy can cook a little. She made some very nice cookies the other day; even Grandma said they might have been worse. Molly can wash dishes, and wheel a baby carriage, and once she helped Mary clean silver, so I am sure she will soon learn to be useful. Maud is too little to work, but we can earn money enough to take care of her. We will send you our address just as soon as we are settled, and will you please tell Grandma not to worry about the bag. We had to take it to carry some things in, but we will send it back by express just as soon as we can.

"Good-bye, darling Papa. We all love you more than we can possibly say, and we hope you and the stepmother will be very happy. If you should be a little angry at first, and disappointed not to find us here, please don't blame any one but me, because it was really all my fault. I thought of the whole plan, and Daisy didn't want to do it at all. We haven't told Molly and Maud yet, because it is very early, and they are both asleep, but I am going to wake them in a few minutes. We must get off before Grandma wakes, or she might make a fuss.

"Your own little girl,

"DULCIE.

"P. S.—We have plenty of money. Uncle Stephen sent it in a letter last week. He said it was

for candy and firecrackers for the Fourth, but we can live on it till we get some work, so please don't worry about us any more than you can help."

"It's a beautiful letter," commended Daisy, wiping her eyes. "I don't see how you always know just the right things to say. Perhaps Papa won't be angry when he understands, but it does seem a dreadful thing not to be here when he comes." And Daisy choked back a rising sob.

The next hour was a very busy one for the little Winslows. In the first place, Molly and Maud had to be awakened, and the wonderful plan explained to them. Not an easy task, for at the first mention of the fact that they were to go away before their father's arrival both children began to cry, and Molly persisted, amid sobs, "that nothing—no, nothing in the world, not even the cruelest step-mother one had ever heard of—would induce her to go anywhere before Papa came home." But again, as with Daisy, Dulcie ended in having her own way. Indeed, she drew such a terrible picture of step-mothers in general that at last Maud was frightened, and Molly was forced into a half-hearted consent to the plan. Then began the preparations for departure. They had to be very quiet, for Grandma was a light sleeper, but Dulcie crept up-stairs to the storeroom, whence she returned with a shabby leather travelling-bag, and in due time they were ready.

"Now we must go down-stairs on tiptoe," commanded Dulcie, who, from the beginning, had taken command of the expedition. "The front door is locked, but it's morning, so there can't be any harm in leaving it unfastened till Mary and Bridget come down. They'll only think we got up early, and went for a walk. We did it once last summer, you know. Now, is everybody ready?"

"Where shall we get our breakfast?" Maud inquired, anxiously.

"We shall have to wait till we get to Peak's Point. There are plenty of stores there, and we can buy something at a baker's. It will be like a picnic, you know. O dear! I didn't think this bag would be so heavy! I'm afraid we've taken too many things."

"It doesn't seem as if we were taking much," said Daisy. "I thought we ought each to have an extra dress, but the bag wouldn't shut when I tried to put them in. I really don't believe we can get on with any less, Dulcie; we've got to be clean, you know."

But Dulcie—who had made an attempt to lift the heavy valise—shook her head resolutely.

"We shall have to get on somehow," she said, and promptly began removing the superfluous articles her younger sisters had so carefully packed.

Daisy sighed, but submitted to the inevitable, and after taking out some of the heaviest of their posses-

sions, Dulcie declared she could easily carry the bag, with a little occasional help from the others. They were a rather pathetic little procession, as they softly opened their door and tiptoed down-stairs. Dulcie carried the valise, and each of the other three was provided with a package as well. Daisy was carrying the family Bible, carefully wrapped in paper; Molly was entrusted with their mother's photograph, in its gilt frame, and Maud hugged to her bosom her favorite rag doll, which no amount of persuasion could induce her to leave behind. As they reached the lower hall, the big clock on the stairs struck six.

"It's very early," whispered Molly. "Do you suppose there will be any trains?"

"Of course there will," Dulcie reassured her; "there are always trains. Now, step very softly on the piazza. I'm so afraid Grandma may hear us and get up to look out of the window."

After all, there was nothing very alarming about the adventure, and Molly and Maud had not taken many steps in the fresh morning air before their spirits began to rise. But Daisy cried softly all the way to the station, and Dulcie's face was very stern and set.

"I think it's rather fun," Maud whispered to Molly, "only I wish we could have had our breakfast before we started. Just listen to that robin. I don't believe robins ever sing like that after breakfast."

"Miss Leslie wrote that she loved to go out early in the morning and study the birds," said Molly. "I can't see what there can be about birds to study, but she said it was very interesting."

Maud came to a sudden pause.

"We've forgotten Miss Leslie's wedding presents," she exclaimed, in dismay. "We'll have to go back for them."

But Dulcie would not hear of going back, even for the precious wedding presents, but she promised Maud they would write Miss Leslie all about everything, and she would surely understand.

"For you know Miss Leslie is a very understanding person," finished Dulcie, "and I'm sure she won't blame us for running away from a step-mother, when we've had nothing but steps ever since we can remember."

It was only a short walk down the hill to the station, but when they reached it, they found the waiting-room still locked up, and not a human being in sight.

"I knew it was too early for trains," fretted Maud. "Now we'll have to go home again."

"No, we won't," declared Dulcie, with assumed cheerfulness. "We'll just wait here till the first one comes along."

So they all sat down on a bench to wait, and it was very still, with nothing but the twittering of the birds to disturb the morning silence.

For a few minutes nobody spoke, and then Maud inquired wonderingly:

"What makes it so solemn? It feels like church."

"I guess it's because we're all feeling rather solemn ourselves," Molly answered.

"Hush," cried Dulcie, suddenly; "I hear a whistle, and it's coming from the right direction, too."

They all listened, with bated breath, and soon the whistle sounded again, much nearer this time, and then came the sound of an approaching train. It was an accommodation train, too, not one of the expresses, which frequently rushed by the little station without stopping, and as it pulled up to the platform, the four little girls rose from their seats. In another moment they had all stepped on board.

"We want four tickets for Peak's Point," Dulcie told the conductor, who was regarding them curiously, and she produced her purse, with the air of an accustomed traveller. But when she had paid the fares and the conductor had given her back the change, her face had lost a little of its cheerful confidence.

"I had no idea it would cost so much," she told Daisy, in an anxious whisper. "It was almost two dollars. That only leaves three to live on till we find a situation."

CHAPTER XVI

LOOKING FOR A SITUATION

IT was nearly half-past seven when the slow morning train drew up at the Peak's Point Station and four solemn, rather frightened little passengers stepped out upon the platform. They were almost the only passengers, and as they passed out of the car, both conductor and brakeman looked after them curiously.

"Now I wonder where them young ones can be off to at this time of the morning," the brakeman remarked. "They look as if they were goin' somewhere to stay, judgin' by the parcels they've got."

"They paid their fares all right," the conductor answered, "and the biggest one looked pretty well able to take care of herself. She handed me a five-dollar bill, and to see her countin' the change, you'd think she'd been used to it all her life. Bright as a button she is, and no mistake." And then the train moved on again, and the two men soon forgot the episode.

In the meantime the four little Winslows had left the station behind, and were walking up the village

street, in quest of a bakery, for by this time they were all decidedly hungry. Dulcie was the only one of them who had ever been to Peak's Point before, but she assured the others that she remembered the place very well, and knew just where the stores were.

"We went to a drug-store," she said, "and Papa and I had soda-water. It was very good."

"I hope we can get something besides soda-water now," said Molly. "It's very nice when you're hot and thirsty, but I don't think it would be at all the thing for breakfast."

"There's a baker on the other side of the street," cried Maud, joyfully. "There's some lovely cake in the window. I'm going to have some."

"Oh, Maudie, not cake for breakfast," remonstrated Daisy. "I never heard of such a thing."

But Maud was firm.

"I always thought I should like cake for breakfast," she maintained. "It would be so different, you know."

Daisy looked grave, but Molly was rather inclined to agree with her younger sister.

"People do have queer things for breakfast sometimes," she reminded them. "Don't you remember Papa told us about that place in Maine where he went fishing, and how they gave him pie and doughnuts every morning at seven o'clock? He said they were rather good when you were hungry."

So Daisy's scruples were silenced, and Dulcie volunteered to make the necessary purchases.

"I don't believe we'd better all go," she advised. "People stare so, and I suppose we do look a little queer, with all our parcels. I'll leave the bag here on the sidewalk, and you can watch it till I come back."

Nobody had any objections to offer, so Dulcie departed on her errand, returning in the course of a few minutes with two well-laden paper bags.

"I bought some rolls," she announced; "they're right out of the oven, the woman said, and I've got some nice fruit cake for Maud. I'm sorry I couldn't get any butter, but the rolls are so fresh, I don't believe we'll mind eating them dry."

But though her voice was cheerful, Dulcie's face was grave and troubled, and when they had found a seat on the steps of a church, and the two younger children had begun on their impromptu breakfast, she drew Daisy aside to whisper anxiously:

"Things do cost a great deal more than I supposed they did. We shan't be able to live long on that five dollars of Uncle Stephen's."

"How long do you suppose it will take us to find a situation?" inquired Daisy, with an anxious glance at her two little sisters.

"Oh, not very long, I don't believe. Of course, we must find something before to-night. But I've been thinking that perhaps it would be better not to

eat all these rolls right away. We might get hungry again by and by, you know, and it isn't certain that we shall find a situation before lunch time."

Daisy—most unselfish of sisters—agreed, although it cost her something of an effort to put her second roll back into the paper bag, for, after all, dry bread is not a very substantial breakfast. Somehow, nobody felt very well satisfied, and even Maud admitted that cake really did taste rather queer so early in the morning, and she would like a glass of milk.

"I thought I hated milk when Grandma made me drink it," she admitted, "but things taste so funny when you have to eat them dry. Let's buy some milk, Dulcie?"

But Dulcie, mindful of the state of their finances, shook her head.

"Perhaps somebody will give us a drink of water," she said, "but I don't think we'd better buy anything more now. Wouldn't you like to live on a farm, Maud? You might learn to milk the cows yourself."

But this suggestion was not at all to Maud's taste. "I don't like cows," she protested, indignantly; "I'm afraid of them. Lizzie said a cow chased her once, when she was a little girl, because she had on a red dress. She always told us not to go near them. Oh, I don't want to go to a place where there are cows."

Maud—who was beginning to feel both tired and cross—suddenly burst into tears.

“Oh, Maudie, don’t be silly,” remonstrated Dulcie. “Maybe we won’t go to a farm at all. I only thought perhaps farmers might be more likely to take little girls to work for them than rich people would. You see, rich people generally have other servants, and ——”

“But I don’t want to be a servant,” wailed Maud. “Servants have to eat in the kitchen, and sometimes they don’t have any dessert. I want to go home, even if we are going to have a stepmother. I don’t believe stepmothers are as bad as having to be servants, and eat in the kitchen.”

“Stepmothers are horrid,” declared Molly, with conviction. “Besides, we don’t want to be burdens any longer. Do stop crying, Maud, and let’s begin to look for a situation. I think it’s going to be rather good fun.”

Thus urged, Maud—who was really a cheerful little soul—choked back a rising sob and dried her eyes. Just then the church clock, over their heads, boomed forth eight strokes, and Dulcie rose.

“Come along,” she said. “I don’t think we’ll stop at any of these houses. It will be nicer out in the country.”

The others sighed wearily, but made no objections. It was the beginning of a very hot day, and already the sun felt uncomfortably warm.

"If we can't get any milk, I don't think soda water would be so bad, after all," remarked Molly, suddenly. "Let's go back to that drug-store." But Daisy—who had decided ideas as to the fitness of things—would not listen to this suggestion. Cake for breakfast was bad enough, but soda-water at eight o'clock in the morning—the thing was unheard of.

"It would make us all sick," she assured them, "and then what could we do? Nobody would take sick people to work for them."

That argument proved unanswerable, and Molly and Maud were forced to submit to remaining thirsty for the present. A few minutes' walk brought them to the end of the village street, and they turned into a shady, grass-grown road, which was much pleasanter. Instinctively the children's spirits began to rise.

"There's a lovely house," exclaimed Molly, coming to a sudden standstill beside some iron gates. "Couldn't we ask there?"

Dulcie hesitated. Truth to tell, now that the moment had arrived for putting her wonderful scheme into operation, she was beginning to feel decidedly nervous and uncomfortable.

"I think we'd better go a little farther," she said. "It's pretty early to disturb people; they might not like it."

"But ladies are more apt to be at home early in

the morning," urged Molly, who was anxious to have the adventure begin. "Besides, it's getting hot, and we're all thirsty. What are you going to do about a reference? I've heard Grandma say she would never engage a girl who didn't have a good reference."

Dulcie looked a little startled. She had not thought of the necessity of references. But just then Maud put in an anxious question.

"Suppose nobody wants us, and night comes, where are we going to sleep?"

"Don't talk about night when it's only just about breakfast time," reproved Molly. "We'll be sure to find a place long before dinner time, and I don't believe, when the people know who we are, they'll make us eat in the kitchen. I think we shall be kind of lady helps, like Phœbe in 'Eight Cousins.' Phœbe did the cooking, but she had lovely times, too, don't you remember?"

"But Dulcie says we mustn't let people know our real names," Maud reminded her, "so I don't see how they can find out who we are."

"Well, it's going to be fun, anyhow," maintained Molly, cheerfully. "I wouldn't go home again for anything, after coming so far, and spending all that money, would you, Dulcie?"

"Of course not," said Dulcie, "and I suppose, after all, we might as well begin with this house as any other. But you mustn't be disappointed if we

have to try a good many places before we find any one who wants us. And—and there's another thing; I don't believe we'd better all go in together. They might get discouraged if they saw there were so many of us."

"But they'll have to know as soon as they engage us," objected Daisy.

"Of course they will, but they needn't find out the very first minute. I think the best way will be for you and me to go first, and then, if the people seem kind, and want us to stay, we can explain about the others. Molly and Maud can wait for us right here, under that big tree. We won't be gone long."

Daisy still looked very doubtful, and Maud began to object to being left behind, but Dulcie was firm, and Molly also proved equal to the occasion. So the question was settled, and the two younger children comfortably ensconced under a big apple-tree, while Dulcie and Daisy walked up the wide gravelled path to the house. It was not a large house, but a very pretty one. There was a lawn, with flower beds in front, and the children caught glimpses of a stable and other outbuildings in the rear. There was no one to be seen, but as they approached the house, the sound of a piano could be distinctly heard.

"Somebody's practising exercises," whispered Dulcie. "Perhaps it's the lady of the house."

"There's a doll's carriage on the piazza," said Daisy, "so there must be a little girl."

"I'm glad," said Dulcie, with a great effort to speak cheerfully. "If the people have a little girl of their own, it may make them kinder to other little girls. I've been thinking about our names. I don't want to change them any more than I can help; it doesn't seem quite honest. I don't see how I can very well change Dulcie into anything but Delia, but you can be Margaret, which is your real name, anyhow, and Molly can be Mary. I'll have to decide about Maud later, but I think our last name had better be Smith. When people in books change their names, they nearly always call themselves Smith or Brown."

Daisy opened her lips to protest, but at that moment the sound of the piano ceased, and in another moment the front door opened, and a very pretty little girl of eight or nine came out onto the piazza. She was so pretty that Dulcie and Daisy stopped short in the path, and stood gazing at her in undisguised admiration. She had big brown eyes, and long golden curls, and she was dressed in white, and wore a string of gold beads round her neck. Altogether, she looked so much like the picture of a little princess in one of their fairy books that Dulcie and Daisy fairly gasped.

As for the stranger herself, she did not seem in the least surprised, but smiled a bright, welcoming

smile, and came running down the steps to greet the visitors.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come," she cried, joyfully. "Mamma said she thought you might come to-day, but I didn't expect you quite so early. It's all right, though; I've finished my practicing. I did a whole half hour since breakfast. Mamma says that's quite enough in summer. Won't you come up on the piazza?"

To say that the two little Winslows were surprised at the cordiality of this greeting would be but a poor way of expressing their feelings. Indeed, they were so much astonished as to be, for the first moment, quite deprived of the power of speech. Then Dulcie found her voice, and managed to gasp out:

"You—you were expecting us!"

"I wasn't exactly expecting you," the stranger explained, "because your mother didn't positively tell Mamma you would come to-day, but I hoped you would, because I don't know any of the children here yet, and I'm so anxious to have somebody to play with."

"I think you must be making a mistake about us," said Daisy, who was beginning to grasp the situation. "Who do you think we are?"

"Why, aren't you the two little Baxter girls? Mrs. Baxter came to call on Mamma yesterday, and she said she would send her two little girls over to

play with me, so when I saw you, of course I thought I knew who you were. It doesn't really make any difference, though, for I've never seen the Baxters, and I shall probably like you just as much. You see, Papa has only taken this house for the summer, and we didn't come till last Monday, so I don't know any of the children who live here. What are your names, and which house do you live in?"

Daisy was silent, and Dulcie flushed a little as she answered.

"Our name is Smith. I'm Delia Smith, and this is my sister Margaret. We don't live here, and we—we didn't exactly come to see you. We'd like to speak to your mother."

The little girl's face fell.

"I'm very sorry," she said, "I hoped you had come to play with me. Mamma has gone to the station with Papa, but she won't be gone very long. I hope you can wait."

"We can wait," said Dulcie. She had taken a fancy to the pretty little girl, and was hoping that her mother might prove as friendly as herself.

The child looked pleased.

"All right," she said, hospitably, "and while you're waiting, perhaps you'd like to come and see the rabbits. They're very cunning, and it's about time I gave them their breakfast."

The prospect of feeding rabbits was very alluring, but Dulcie was mindful of the importance of maintaining her dignity. People looking for situations ought not to waste their time on anything so trivial as rabbits.

"I think perhaps we'd better wait here," she said. "Do you happen to know whether your mother needs any help?"

"Help," repeated the little girl, rather vaguely, "what kind of help?"

"Oh, help in the house, or—or in the garden. Any kind that little girls could do. I thought she might want some one to wash the dishes, or make the beds, or ——"

"Oh, you mean a maid," interrupted her new acquaintance, with sudden comprehension. "No, I'm sure Mamma doesn't need any one. I heard her tell Papa all the servants were very satisfactory. What made you want to know?"

"Because we—oh, it doesn't matter. I'm afraid there isn't any use of our waiting to see your mother, after all."

"Oh, please don't go so soon," pleaded the little girl, clasping her hands imploringly. "You've only just come, and I do want somebody to play with so much. Wait and see Mamma; you'll love her, and perhaps she knows some lady who wants a maid. I suppose your mother wants to find a place for one, just as Mamma did when we went to Europe last

year. Don't you really think you'd like to come and see the rabbits?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't," interposed Daisy, firmly. "We've left our—some people waiting for us on the road, and they might get worried if we stay away too long."

"It will only take a few minutes to see the rabbits," their new friend urged, "and Mamma will be back very soon. Do you think those people would mind waiting just a little longer?"

Dulcie wavered. The little girl was so cordial; it seemed almost rude to refuse her invitation. She glanced appealingly at Daisy.

"I think we might stay just a few minutes," Daisy agreed. She loved pets, and to possess rabbits had long been an unfulfilled dream.

So the question was settled, and five minutes later three very eager little girls were bending lovingly over a family of soft, wriggling baby rabbits.

"They're the cunningest things I ever saw," declared Daisy, pressing one downy mite to her cheek. "I do wish Molly and Maud could see them."

"Who are Molly and Maud?" inquired her new friend, with interest.

Daisy started and flushed. In the interest of the moment she had quite forgotten the rôle of Margaret Smith.

"They are our two sisters," she explained, with an apologetic glance at Dulcie. "We all love rab-

bits, but Grandma will never let us have any pets."

"You must bring them to see my rabbits," her hostess said politely. "I've got so many, I'd like to give you some, if your grandma would let you have them."

"You are very kind," said Dulcie, "but I'm afraid we couldn't take them. You see, we don't expect to live at home any longer."

The brown eyes opened very wide, and their new acquaintance inquired in a tone of the utmost astonishment:

"Where are you going to live, then?"

"We don't know," said Dulcie; "that's what we wanted to speak to your mother about. We are looking for a situation."

Their new friend gasped.

"But you're not grown up; you're only little girls," she faltered. "Little girls only work if their mothers are very poor. You don't look a bit like poor people."

"We're not exactly poor," Dulcie explained, "but there are—reasons why we don't want to live at home any more, so we've come away to try to find a situation. We don't mind working hard, and there are really a good many things we can do. We've made our own beds and dusted our rooms ever since Liz—I mean for quite a long time, and we can wash dishes, and cook a little, too. If we

could have a cook-book, I think we would manage very well."

The look in the little stranger's eyes had changed from astonishment to admiration.

"I think you are very clever," she said. "I wish I could do useful things like that, but I shouldn't like to leave my home. I think I should die if I had to go away from Mamma and Papa."

"I'm sure you will never have to do it," Dulcie reassured her. "You see, it's quite different with us. Our mamma is dead, and our papa—oh, well, we'd rather not talk about it, but it's all very sad, and we don't want to be burdens any longer. Let's talk some more about the rabbits."

Their new friend nodded comprehendingly.

"I know how you feel," she said. "I hate talking about sad things, too. I don't like sad stories, either. Once Mamma read me about little Paul Dombey, and I cried so much I had a headache."

"I wish we had a mamma," said Daisy, with a sigh. "Children are never burdens to their mothers. I think yours must be nice; you talk so much about her."

"She's the loveliest lady in the world. She's so good that everybody loves her. Haven't you ever heard about her?"

"No, I don't think we have," Daisy admitted reluctantly. "You see, we don't know very many people. What's your mamma's name?"

"Mrs. Richard B. Thorne, and I am Barbara Muriel Thorne."

"Oh, what a beautiful name!" cried Dulcie. "I've read about Barbaras, but I never met one before. I wish my name was Barbara, or else Gladys. Muriel is quite a book name, too."

"Yes, they are pretty names," Barbara Muriel answered, with some pride. "But Delia is rather a nice name, too," she added, politely.

"I think it's about the ugliest name I ever heard," said Dulcie. "I can't think what made me choose it."

Barbara looked rather puzzled.

"I didn't know people ever chose their own names," she said. "Are you Baptists?"

"Oh, no," said Dulcie, blushing; "we are Episcopalians. What made you think we were Baptists?"

"Because Hannah said Baptists weren't baptized till they were grown up, and I thought perhaps they chose their own names, instead of having them given to them, when they were babies."

Dulcie was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable, but fortunately, at that moment, Daisy came to her rescue.

"Hark!" she exclaimed, eagerly; "I think I hear a carriage. Perhaps it's Barbara's mother."

Barbara ran to look, and returned in a moment with the joyful intelligence that it was Mamma coming home.

"She's just driving round to the front door," she said. "I'll run ahead, and tell her about you." And away she flew, followed more slowly by her two companions.

"I—I feel just like running away," faltered Daisy. "Oh, Dulcie, let's go. It all seems so very—queer."

"We can't run away now," said Dulcie, and her tone was decided, though her teeth were beginning to chatter. "It wouldn't be polite, and besides, I think perhaps Barbara's mother may understand, and be kind to us."

CHAPTER XVII

STEPMOTHERS

AS the children approached the house they saw that a pony phaeton was standing by the front steps, out of which a lady had just alighted. She was speaking to the groom, who had run up from the stable to take the horse, but at the sound of Barbara's voice she turned to greet her little daughter, and even at that first glimpse Dulcie and Daisy could see that she had a very sweet face.

"Mamma," cried Barbara, reaching her mother's side in a rather breathless condition, "here are two little girls who want to see you. Their names are Delia and Margaret Smith. The biggest one is Delia; she chose her name herself, and the littlest one is Margaret."

Mrs. Thorne greeted the visitors very kindly.

"I am glad Barbara has found some little friends," she said. "Suppose we all come into the house. It is rather warm, and I would like to take off my hat before doing anything else."

Her voice was so kind and cordial, and her smile so pleasant, that Dulcie and Daisy were both conscious of a sensation of decided relief. Still, the



"WE'RE—WE'RE LOOKING FOR A SITUATION."—Page 259.

situation remained an embarrassing one, for it was quite evident that Mrs. Thorne supposed them to be some little neighbors come to make a morning call. However, there was nothing to be done but to follow Barbara and her mother into the house, and then they found themselves in a cool, flower-scented room, and Mrs. Thorne was saying in her bright, friendly voice:

"I am sorry you had such a hot morning for your walk. I hope you did not have far to come."

"We—we don't live here," stammered Dulcie, her cheeks growing suddenly very hot. "We came in the train, and walked up from the station."

"You came on the train?" Mrs. Thorne repeated, incredulously. "You don't mean by yourselves?"

"Oh, yes," said Dulcie. "You see, we had to. We're—we're looking for a situation."

Mrs. Thorne gazed in growing bewilderment from one serious little face to the other.

"A situation," she gasped. "Why, you are only children."

"I'm twelve," said Dulcie, rather tremulously, "and Dais—I mean Margaret, is eleven. Of course we wouldn't expect to be paid very much at first."

"But I don't understand. Why do you want to work at all? You are not poor children."

That was just what Barbara had said, and Dulcie felt her heart sink. How could they ever explain the situation without telling the whole story?

"We've gone away, because we don't want to be burdens to our stepmother," put in Daisy, coming to her sister's relief.

A shadow crossed Mrs. Thorne's sweet face, and as if instinctively, she slipped an arm round Barbara, who was standing by her side.

"Don't you love your stepmother?" she asked, gently. "Isn't she kind to you?"

"We've never seen her," Daisy explained. "She's only coming to-day. Papa married her in California, and we never knew anything about it till yesterday. We are sure she won't want us, and we are very tired of being burdens to people, so we came away to earn our own livings."

Daisy paused abruptly, and two big tears rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Mrs. Thorne was really wonderful. She seemed to understand the whole situation at once, without asking another question.

"You poor little chicks," she said, and her voice was so kind that, instead of checking Daisy's tears, it caused her to cry all the more. And then somehow, they were all on the sofa together, and Mrs. Thorne had one arm round Daisy, and the other round Dulcie—who had also begun to cry—and Barbara was looking on, with tears of sympathy in her own eyes.

"We love our papa very much indeed," sobbed Dulcie, "but we think perhaps he will be glad to

have us go away, on account of the stepmother, you know. I promised Mamma before she died that I would always take care of the others, and stepmothers are so very cruel sometimes."

"There, there, dear," soothed Mrs. Thorne, "don't try to talk any more till you feel better. I think I understand everything. You have made a foolish mistake, but it's going to be all right."

There was something wonderfully reassuring in that kind, cheerful voice, and in a few minutes the two little girls had dried their tears, and were beginning to feel almost cheerful themselves. But now a new difficulty arose; something that neither of them had ever thought of. In their absorption they had quite failed to notice that the hot sunshine had been suddenly obscured by a dark cloud, until suddenly the rumble of distant thunder fell upon their ears. Daisy was on her feet in a moment.

"There's going to be a thunder-storm!" she exclaimed. "We must go right after Molly and Maud. Maud hates thunder."

"Who are Molly and Maud?" inquired Mrs. Thorne, and, as if in answer to her question, there was a sound of little feet on the piazza, and through the open window came an anxious voice.

"Dulcie, Daisy, where are you? There's a horrid thunder-storm coming up."

"They are our two little sisters," explained Dulcie. "We left them out on the road. We were

afraid people wouldn't take us if they saw how many there were. Would you mind very much if they came in, just till the shower is over? Maud is so afraid of thunder-storms."

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Thorne, who was beginning to look very much amused. "Run and bring the little girls in, Barbara."

Away flew hospitable Barbara, closely followed by Dulcie and Daisy, and in another moment they were back again, accompanied by Molly and Maud, who both looked very red and uncomfortable.

"It was all Maud's fault," Molly was whispering apologetically to Dulcie. "I wanted to wait, but the minute she heard the thunder she was frightened, and she cried so hard I had to let her come to find you."

"It was beginning to thunder," Maud was at the same moment explaining to the sympathetic Barbara. "Dulcie and Daisy stayed away so long, and I was so thirsty. I thought I was going to like cake for breakfast, but I didn't; it left such a funny taste afterwards."

"Dulcie and Daisy," repeated Barbara; "why, I thought their names were Delia and Margaret."

Maud looked blank, and Dulcie, blushing furiously, but still with a desperate attempt to keep up their assumed characters, hastened to explain.

"Dulcie and Daisy are our home names," she said. "Daisy's real name is Margaret."

"And your real name is Delia, I suppose," said Mrs. Thorne, smiling; "Delia Smith, I think you said."

Dulcie was silent. She was a truthful child, and not even for the honor of the Winslow family could she bring herself to tell a deliberate lie. Mrs. Thorne seemed to understand, for she smiled again, and her voice was very kind.

"Barbara darling," she said, "suppose you take Molly and Maud into the dining-room, and get them each a glass of milk. Maud says she is thirsty, and cake is hardly a substantial breakfast. Ask Jane to boil some eggs, and warm some oatmeal, and we will all come in a few minutes. Now, my dear little girls," she added in a graver tone, when the three younger children had left the room, "I want you to tell me your real names, and where you live. I must let your family know where you are as soon as possible. They are probably frightened to death about you already."

Dulcie clasped her hands in despair, as she saw the last hope of carrying out her wonderful plan of independence fading from her grasp. But there was an air of gentle determination about Mrs. Thorne that convinced her of the uselessness of a refusal. She answered meekly:

"My name is Dulcie Winslow and my sister is really Margaret, but every one calls her Daisy. We live at Tarrytown with our grandmother, and ——"

"You don't mean to tell me you are old Dr. Winslow's grandchildren!" interrupted Mrs. Thorne, in a tone of genuine astonishment.

Dulcie nodded, and Daisy asked timidly:

"Did you know our grandfather?"

"I used to see him often when I was a little girl. We were neighbors in New York, and his son Jim was a great friend of mine."

"Why, that's our papa!" cried Dulcie, shame and disappointment alike forgotten in the excitement of this discovery. "How wonderful to think you knew Papa. Perhaps you knew Mamma, too."

"No, I never saw your father after he went to college, but we were great friends as children. He was a very nice boy."

"He's the loveliest man in the world," declared Daisy, with shining eyes.

Mrs. Thorne smiled.

"Is he indeed?" she said. "One would hardly think you were so fond of him when you have been trying to run away from him."

"Oh, we weren't running away from Papa," cried Dulcie, quite horrified at the suggestion. "We love him better than any one else in the world, and we were so happy when we knew he was coming home from China, but then we heard about the step-mother, and I thought—I was afraid——" Dulcie paused in hopeless confusion.

"We didn't want to be incumbrances," said Daisy. "Aunt Julia Chester said we were incumbrances to Grandma. Dulcie looked up the word in the dictionary, and it means the same thing as being a burden. Dulcie thought we might be able to work for our living, even if we were only little girls, and so ——"

"And so you ran away, like two very foolish children, and took your younger sisters with you. I suppose it never occurred to you how unhappy you would make your father."

At this awful suggestion both little girls began to cry.

"I—I thought he would be proud of us," sobbed Dulcie. "I wouldn't make Papa unhappy for the whole world."

"There, there, dear, don't cry; I knew you wouldn't." And Mrs. Thorne put a kind arm round the trembling child. "You thought you were doing something very fine, and now you are going to do something much finer, by going home again, and showing your papa that you trust him, and feel sure he would not do anything to make you unhappy. As for the stepmother; all stepmothers are not wicked. There are many who love their stepchildren dearly. Perhaps your stepmother is longing to know you, and to make you love her. I doubt very much that she has ever thought of you as incumbrances. Now I think breakfast must be

ready, so dry your eyes, and we will join the others in the dining-room."

That was a wonderful morning; the children never forgot it. To Molly and Maud it was a morning of pure delight, and even their elder sisters, in spite of several causes for anxiety, could not help enjoying themselves, whenever they forgot to think about the future. Mrs. Thorne was very kind to them all, and Barbara proved a delightful little hostess. The shower was a very slight one, and by the time they had finished breakfast, the sun was shining once more. Mrs. Thorne went out in the pony phaeton again, and Dulcie and Daisy had an uncomfortable conviction that her errand was in some way connected with their affairs. Nothing, however, was said about their going home at once, and Barbara took them all out to inspect the rabbits. When it grew too hot in the sun, they came indoors again, and Barbara took them up to her nursery—a room so full of beautiful toys that Molly and Maud felt as if suddenly transported to fairyland.

"What do you suppose is going to happen?" Daisy whispered to Dulcie, on the way up-stairs. "Are we to stay here till somebody comes to take us home?"

"I don't know," Dulcie answered mournfully; "Mrs. Thorne is attending to everything, and I don't like to ask her any questions. The thing I'm most afraid of is that Grandma may come for us

herself. It would be dreadful to have to go all the way home in the train with Grandma."

At one o'clock Mrs. Thorne called them all down to luncheon, and it was just as they were finishing that meal that the telegram arrived. The waitress brought it in on a tray, and handed it to Mrs. Thorne, who opened it, and read aloud:

"Please send children home by next train. They will be met at the station."

There was a moment of dead silence, and then Mrs. Thorne said quietly:

"The telegram is from your grandmother, in answer to one I sent her this morning."

"We thought it was," said Dulcie, meekly. "How soon does the next train go?"

Mrs. Thorne left the room to consult a time-table, and Barbara began to express her entire disapproval of the whole affair.

"I don't see why you can't stay," she protested; "there's plenty of room. It would be so nice to have you stay all summer, and we could have such fun all together. Wouldn't you like to stay?"

"It would be lovely," said Dulcie, politely, "but your mother doesn't think it would be right. She is afraid Papa wouldn't like it."

"Our papa is coming home to-day," chimed in Molly, "and we haven't seen him for more than a year."

"Papás are pretty nice," Barbara admitted, "but of course they're not like mammas. I don't think I could possibly leave Mamma, even to go to the nicest place in the world. Mamma says perhaps you can come to see us again some day. I'm so glad your name isn't Delia Smith, Dulcie; Dulcie Winslow is ever so much prettier, and I think I like Daisy better than Margaret, too. I suppose your papa would be disappointed if you were away when he came. Haven't you any mamma?"

"No," said Dulcie, with a sigh; "she died when we were very little. I am the only one who can remember her."

Barbara looked interested.

"My first mamma died when I was a little baby," she said; "I can't remember her a bit."

The four little Winslows nearly dropped their spoons into the ice-cream, so great was their astonishment at this amazing announcement.

"Your—your what?" gasped Dulcie.

"My first mamma," repeated Barbara, calmly. "I've got her picture on my bureau, and I always kiss her good-night. Mamma says she loved me very much, but I'm sure she loves me just as much herself, because she says I'm the preciousest thing in the world."

At that moment Mrs. Thorne returned, with a time-table in her hand.

"The next down train leaves here in half an

hour," she said; "I'm afraid we shall have to hurry a little. I have sent word to James to harness the ponies, and will drive you to the station myself."

"Mrs. Thorne," said Dulcie, regarding her hostess with big, astonished eyes, "I hope it isn't a rude question, but I've got to ask. Are you—are you Barbara's stepmother?"

Mrs. Thorne laughed merrily.

"So you have found out," she said. "Yes, I am, but that doesn't make any difference in our love for each other, does it, Barbara darling?" And she stooped to kiss the little girl, who responded by flinging both arms round her neck.

"No, indeed it doesn't," she cried, heartily. "I wouldn't change you for all the mammas in the world."

"And we thought all stepmothers were wicked and cruel," said Dulcie, slowly. "O dear! I'm afraid we've been dreadfully silly, and I guess we'd better go home just as soon as we possibly can."

CHAPTER XVIII

A HOME-COMING

“**Y**OU are really, without exception, the worst-behaved children I have ever heard of in my life. I cannot think of any punishment severe enough for what you deserve.”

Grandma spoke in a tone of awful sternness, and her expression was, if possible, even sterner than her voice. The four little culprits stood before her in a row, and trembled, but nobody could think of anything to say. It was half-past three, and the children had reached home five minutes earlier, and been sent straight up to Grandma's room by Mary, in obedience to the orders she had received. It was Mary who had met the party at the station, and on the way home had told them of the excitement and consternation their disappearance had caused.

“I never saw the old lady so upset before,” she declared. “She most took Bridget's and my head off, and goodness knows we hadn't anything to do with it. She read that letter you left on the bureau, and she thought we'd told you the news about the stepmother, that was to be kept a secret till your pa

came home. She telegraphed to Miss Kate to come home, and she was 'most wild with fright about you, till that lady's message came."

It was all very dreadful, and yet there was a certain thrill in the knowledge that Grandma had really been worried about them.

"I didn't think she'd care much what became of us," Dulcie had whispered to Daisy, and Daisy had answered, with her usual cheerfulness:

"It's rather nice to know she does care just a little bit, after all."

And now they were facing Grandma's wrath, and awaiting the punishment which they felt sure was to follow.

"I cannot conceive how such an absurd idea ever entered any of your heads," Mrs. Winslow went on, eyeing them over her spectacles. "For children in your position even to contemplate such a plan is outrageous. A Winslow taking a situation like an Irish servant girl. It is horrible!" And the aristocratic old lady actually shuddered.

Dulcie hung her head; her cheeks were crimson.

"It was all my fault," she said, humbly; "I thought of it first, and the others didn't want to do it at all."

"I was quite sure you were the ringleader," returned Grandma, coldly. "You generally are, where any mischief is concerned. But Daisy and Molly are both old enough to know better. Maud is

still too young to be expected to have judgment of any kind."

It was then that Maud did what Dulcie afterwards described as "a noble thing." She had been trying to hide behind Daisy, but at Grandma's last words she suddenly stepped forward and spoke.

"If the others are going to be punished," she said, in a clear, decided little voice, "I guess you'd better punish me, too. I knew it was naughty to eat cake for breakfast, and I did it even when Daisy told me not to."

There was a little gasp of admiration from the three older children, and even Grandma's stern face relaxed into something like a grim smile.

"I am glad to see that you are capable of realizing how naughty you have been," she said. "I have had a terrible morning, but thank Heaven, my responsibility is nearly at an end. Your father arrives this afternoon, and it will be his duty to decide upon what punishment you are to receive."

"Grandma," cried Dulcie, scarcely able to believe her ears, "aren't you going to punish us, then?"

"Under ordinary circumstances I should certainly punish you all severely," Mrs. Winslow answered, "but with your father's return my guardianship over you ceases. I wish I could give him a better account of your behavior during his absence, but perhaps I am getting too old to deal with children.

Let us hope that your stepmother may have better success than I have had."

"I'm very sorry, Grandma," murmured conscientious Daisy, the tears of mortification starting to her eyes. "We really did want to be good, and we hated being burdens."

"Well, we won't say any more about it," interrupted Grandma, rather hurriedly. "I dare say you have been no worse than the majority of children, except for your absurd behavior of this morning, which is really beyond the comprehension of any sane person. Now go to your room and change your dresses. You none of you look fit to be seen, and I wish you to be on the piazza to greet your father and his wife. I have received another telegram saying they will arrive by the five-ten."

None of the four had dreamed of getting off so easily, and yet as they climbed the stairs to their own room, they were all very silent.

"It's rather nice to get back, isn't it?" remarked Molly, a little unsteadily, glancing about the familiar bedroom, as Dulcie set down the valise and began removing the various articles she had packed so proudly only that morning.

"It seems as if we'd been away for a long time," said Maud. "I didn't know one day could be so long. Perhaps it's because we got up so early. I think I'm getting a little sleepy."

"Lie down and rest," Daisy suggested. "It isn't

time to dress yet, and perhaps you can get a little nap."

Maud promptly curled herself up on the bed she and Molly shared, and in five minutes had fallen fast asleep. But none of the others felt at all inclined to follow her example. They were all far too much excited to sleep. They sat close together, and talked in low, subdued voices, so as not to disturb Maud.

"There's one thing we can be thankful for," said Daisy. "We've found out that stepmothers aren't all bad, and that's a great relief. I don't believe Mrs. Thorne ever thought Barbara a burden."

"No, I don't believe she did," Dulcie agreed, "but then Barbara was only three when Mrs. Thorne married her father, and you can't help loving a cunning little girl of three, but it will be quite different with us. Grandma will be sure to tell her how horrid we are, and then she'll begin to hate us."

"She won't hate us if she's anything like Mrs. Thorne," said Daisy, with conviction. "Anyhow, Papa loves us, and he won't say we're horrid. Why shouldn't she believe him just as well as Grandma?"

"Perhaps he'll think we've grown worse since he went away," said Dulcie, mournfully, but Daisy refused to listen to any such gloomy possibilities.

"Mrs. Thorne said she was sure Papa wouldn't marry anybody who wasn't going to love us," she maintained, "and I'm not going to worry any more



Eleanor Yeeden.

"DO WE SAY 'HOW DO YOU DO, STEPMOTHER?'"—Page 275.

than I can help. Now let's think about dressing up. I'm going to curl Maud's hair the way Lizzie used to do it, and Molly must wear her white muslin with pink ribbons."

As the clock on the stairs struck five, the four little girls, all dressed in their best, stepped out on the piazza, and seated themselves in a solemn row to await the arrival of the station hack. They were all feeling very nervous, even Daisy, and nobody felt much like talking. Grandma was still in her room, and they had the piazza to themselves.

"Shall we have to kiss the stepmother?" Maud inquired, anxiously.

"It will depend on whether she wants to kiss us or not," answered Dulcie. "We shall kiss Papa first, of course, and then we'll see what she wants to do."

"Do we say 'How do you do, stepmother?'" Maud wanted to know.

Dulcie shook her head.

"I don't think that would do," she said, doubtfully. "It doesn't sound exactly polite."

"Barbara calls Mrs. Thorne 'Mamma,'" said Molly. "Do you think she will want us to call her Mamma?"

"I hope not," said Dulcie, reddening. "I don't want to call anybody Mamma except our own dear mamma in Heaven."

"Barbara talked about her first mamma," Daisy

reminded them. "I think we'd better let Papa decide what we are to call her. He's sure to know what is right," she finished, with the comforting conviction that Papa always knew best about everything.

Just then the whistle of an approaching train fell upon their ears, and Grandma, in her best black silk, came out onto the piazza.

It was only a quarter of a mile to the station, and in the silence that followed they could hear the stopping of the train, and then the puffing of the engine as it moved on again. Grandma sat in a rocking-chair and folded her hands in her lap. She didn't look in the least excited, not even ruffled. As for the four little girls, their hearts were beating so fast they could scarcely breathe. Half-unconsciously Dulcie slipped her hand into Daisy's, and held it tight. There followed five minutes of breathless suspense, and then came the sound of approaching wheels. In another moment the station hack had turned in at the gate, and drawn up before the front steps.

"Papa, dear, dear Papa!" In the first joyful moment everything else in the world was forgotten, and four pairs of arms were held out, as four little figures rushed forward to meet the tall, smiling gentleman, who had sprung from the carriage, and was bounding up the steps.

"Well, chicks, here I am!" cried Mr. Winslow,

kissing them all round, "glad to see me, eh? Not half as glad as I am to see you all, I'll be bound. How you have grown, Dulcie. How well you are looking, Daisy. Can these two big girls really be my babies, Molly and Maud? And here's Grandma, too." And he released himself from the children's clinging arms, and went forward to greet his step-mother.

And now there was another joyful cry, but this time it was mingled with astonishment.

"Miss Leslie, oh, Miss Leslie, we're so glad to see you! We never knew you were coming, too." And the pretty young lady, who had followed Mr. Winslow up the steps, suddenly found herself being violently hugged by four very excited little girls.

"Where's Uncle Stephen?" inquired Daisy, who was the first to recover from the surprise. "Didn't Uncle Stephen come, too?"

Miss Leslie laughed and blushed.

"No, dear," she said, "he didn't come this time, but he sent a great deal of love to you all, and hopes to see you when he comes East next winter."

"But—but, isn't he going to—aren't you——" Daisy paused in utter bewilderment. If Miss Leslie were not going to marry Uncle Stephen, then why had she come? And, more astonishing still, where, oh, where was the dreaded stepmother? She glanced in the direction of the hack, in quest of a

third occupant, but the only other person to be seen was the driver, who had sprung down from his seat and was lifting out the bags.

In the meantime Maud was giving Miss Leslie an important bit of news.

"We're making you some wedding presents," she announced, giving the visitor's hand an affectionate squeeze. "I won't tell you what they are, because they're going to be a surprise."

Mr. Winslow caught the words, and turned anxiously to his mother.

"What does she mean?" he inquired, sharply. "They haven't been told, have they?"

"I am sorry to say they have," Mrs. Winslow answered. "It was not my fault. I have said nothing, in accordance with your request, and neither has Kate. All the trouble has come through that meddlesome gossip, Lizzie. I always told you she was not the proper person to have the care of children, but you would never listen."

Mr. Winslow looked annoyed, but before he could speak, Molly put into words the question that had been filling all their minds.

"Where is she?" she demanded, looking in astonishment from one face to another.

"Where is who, dear?" Miss Leslie asked, gently.

"Why, the stepmother," said Molly. "Lizzie said Papa was bringing her home."

Miss Leslie laughed.

"I am the stepmother," she said, and stooped to kiss the astonished Molly as she spoke.

It was long past the children's bedtime, as Grandma had several times reminded them, but somehow nobody had seemed to hear, and at last Grandma had gone indoors, in disgust, leaving the rest of the Winslow family on the piazza. They were a very happy party. Dulcie and Daisy each occupied an arm of their father's chair, Molly sat on his knee, and Maud was comfortably ensconced in the lap of the "stepmother"!

"It's been the most wonderful day we ever had in our lives," said Daisy, with a little sigh of utter content. "It began pretty badly, but the end was beautiful."

"I shall never, never again try to imitate book people," declared Dulcie. "Things never happen the way you expect them to. I ought to have found it out the day we tried to find 'the stolen child,' but I went right on, and did another silly thing, that was a great deal worse. Oh, Papa dear, are you quite sure you don't think I ought to be punished? It really was all my fault, you know."

Mr. Winslow smiled and patted her cheek.

"I think we will let the punishment go this once," he said, glancing at his wife. "Don't you agree with me, Florence?"

"I certainly do," the stepmother answered,

heartily. "All is well that ends well, you know, and I don't believe they will try looking for situations again."

"No, indeed, we won't," promised Dulcie. "Oh, Mamma, if we had only known it was going to be you, we should have been so happy!"

"You don't think I am going to be a cruel step-mother, then?" Mrs. Winslow said, smiling.

"I don't believe you could be cruel, even if you tried," Dulcie declared, and Daisy added, softly:

"We loved you the first time we saw you, and we've been loving you ever since. We were so glad when we thought you were going to marry Uncle Stephen, but to have you for our own mamma is the most beautiful thing that could possibly happen."

There were tears in Mrs. Winslow's eyes, and she drew Daisy to her side and kissed her.

"You haven't loved me one bit more than I have loved you," she said, a little unsteadily. "I have been longing for you all ever since that afternoon last January, and, oh, I do hope God will help me to be a real mother to you."

They were all silent for a moment after that. It was very beautiful out there in the moonlight, and nobody felt like speaking. At last Molly broke the silence.

"Do you really mean it?" she questioned, anxiously. "You're not just saying it to be polite, are you?"

“Mean what, dear?” Mrs. Winslow asked.

“That about wanting us ever since last winter?”

“Indeed I do mean it,” her stepmother answered, and there was a ring of sincerity in her voice that banished the children’s last lingering doubt. “I have never wanted anything quite so much in my life. Why, Molly darling, I wanted you even before I ever saw you.”

“Why, then,” cried Dulcie, with sparkling eyes, “it’s all right, children. We know Papa wants us, and if Mamma does, too, why—why, don’t you see—oh, it’s so beautiful! We won’t be burdens or incumbrances any more!”

THE END

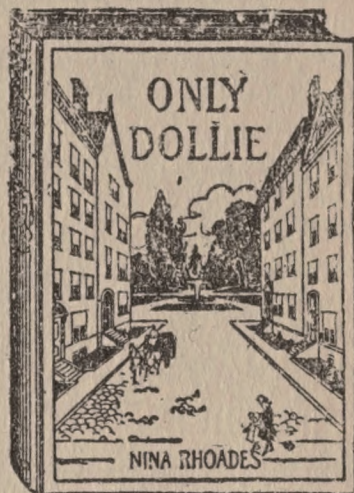
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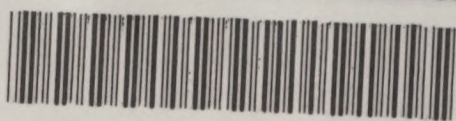
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